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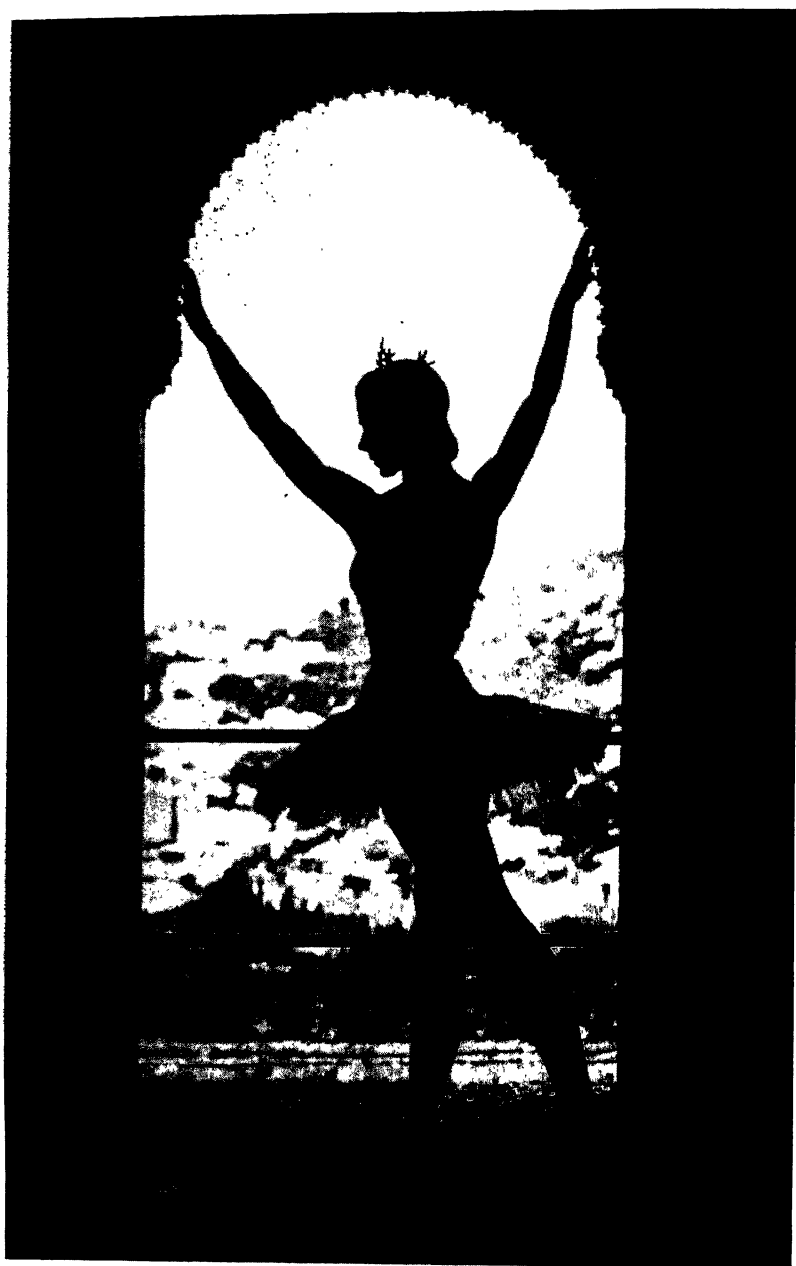


# FONTEYN

A Study of the Ballerina  
in her Setting







IN THE ALHAMBRA  
During the Festival in Granada  
*Photograph by Baron*

# Fonteyn

A Study of the Ballerina  
in her Setting

by

JAMES MONAHAN

WITH TWENTY-FIVE ILLUSTRATIONS

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I

MARGOT DE ARIAS

A YOUNG man was asked by a senior poet what he wanted to do with his life and he replied: 'I want to be a poet'. To that his elder replied, brusquely enough and not altogether unfairly, that he could well understand a desire to write poetry but that to want 'to be a poet' had a false ring about it; was it not a wish 'to be regarded as' rather than 'to be doing'? Allowance must be made for the limitations of an analogy between young men who want to be regarded as poets and girls who want to be famous as ballerinas; and if the feminine, merry-eyed day-dream seems to be the less disenchanting, the less smug of the two, that, I daresay, is an irrationally personal view. Margot Fonteyn, in any case, is not a bit like that young man. I am not sure (nor is she) if she ever said, as she is reported to have said, that she could not bear to be a ballerina. But this outrageous remark would have been in character. In her early adolescence, when she was just beginning to discover other people's admiration for her talent, the notion of a ballerina's status filled her with no enthusiasm. She wanted to dance ballet—that most certainly—but to be a ballerina implied a temperamental, limelit grandeur, a life sentence of tantrums and magnificence, which prompted self-deprecating giggles rather than any sense of regal anticipation.

A ballerina she has become. Yet her adolescent reluctance to see herself in the tiara of a *ballerina assoluta* has been belied neither by her career nor by her character as, under the stress of work and fame, it has developed. As her attitude was some

twenty-one years ago, when people first pointed her out as the heiress apparent to Markova, so, essentially, it still is, at a time when it is argued whether there is any ballerina in the Western world (or, for that matter, in Russia) to equal her.

She is not a dedicated dancer. To say that of someone who has given her working life to ballet dancing and has made a success of it, unrivalled by any British predecessor, may seem odd to some people and dismaying to the balletomaniacs. In her childhood and adolescence, when, first, Diaghileff and then de Basil had opened British eyes to ballet and when, at Sadler's Wells, a home-grown company was beginning to assert itself, not a few girls in this country began to dream of being ballerinas. She was not one of them. She was not one of those children who, of their own volition, fasten their ambitions on a particular line of achievement. There was nothing in the early days of her career to compare with the vocational sense which forced Frederick Ashton—an unhappy young toiler in a city office—to teach himself to become a choreographer. Margot Fonteyn, it could be said, followed the line of least resistance. Her mother, whether on the family's extensive peregrinations or on its intermittent stops in England, had her taught ballet and, when the daughter showed young signs of becoming very good at it, saw that the lessons were intensified; so the point was reached when, after sensible and cautious maternal discussions with the experts (Ninette de Valois being chief among the consultants), it was decided that the girl would do well to take up ballet dancing as a career. The girl, being so good at dancing, naturally enjoyed it but she did not dream about it or pine for it.

When she looks back now across the years which separate her first meeting, at the age of fourteen, with Ninette de Valois and the incessant curtain-calls and the bouquets which are the sequel nowadays to her *Aurora* or *Odette-Odile* at Covent Garden, she declares that her career has all been a kind

of accident. She will say this, not with the affectation (the bashful withdrawal to provoke the more ardent compliment) which might be favoured by some other celebrities, but with a little stare of self-analytical, genuine surprise and in a tone of cheerfully characteristic self-debunking. That does not mean that what she says is true.

Her career, nevertheless, may have been a kind of accident. Had she and the man she married known each other before the war (they met then but only once and fleetingly) instead of some years after it, she might well have said good-bye to her incipient fame without, I think, any protracted qualms; in those different circumstances, too, she would have been a happy woman leading a full and unregretful life. For she is essentially an equable person, with the feminine gift of chameleon-adaptability, the head to appreciate many aspects of life and the vitality which brings enjoyment. Among her enjoyments, she says, are a good meal and talk; and that is true. She is remarkable among ballet dancers not in being a good eater (their prodigious exercises bring, even necessitate, a lusty appetite), but for the very real pleasure she takes in the exchange of ideas. She is a party-girl, too, and in earlier days, though now no longer, her unwillingness to leave the after-midnight gathering has brought down on her scoldings from those more anxious than she was about the morrow's *Giselle* or *Swan Lake*. Being an ambassador's wife is also a job, and there is no doubt that nowadays she takes it with a youthful seriousness, accepting its social demands on her time in after-theatre hours. But, equally, there can be no doubt that she finds it entertaining, as she also finds the introduction to the Onassian world of Mediterranean shipping magnates which has been another consequence of her marriage. Her fame has, inevitably, been followed by 'para-balletic' duties, important among them being her presidency of the Royal Academy of Dancing;

here, again, her behaviour is a blend of seriousness and pleasure. She has shown herself an active and straight thinker about the organisation of British ballet (not to mention international ballet as well); and she certainly enjoys the chance which her career has given her to make a contribution to this subject. In brief, her capacity for interest, which means for living, for enjoyment, is wide.

In another sense, though, her career has, of course, been no accident. However dispassionately she may regard it, and may have regarded it in the spring years, it has been the natural consequence of her outstanding talent and of others', if not her own, appreciation of that talent at its proper value. That is not altered at all by the reflection that it has been rather a matter-of-fact business; in the course of it the girl, much encouraged (notably by Ninette de Valois and by her most persistent choreographer, Frederick Ashton), gradually realised her potentialities and, gradually too, assumed that responsibility towards her talent which any considerable artist must have. She is not, I have said, a dedicated dancer; and if the reasons given for that observation are right, it will be clear enough already that a dedicated dancer, in the usual, rapturous meaning of the term, is unlikely to be one like her who is so well aware of and so capable of enjoying the many-sidedness of life, not excluding its absurdities. For she is emphatically blessed with a sense of humour; she can take herself un-seriously and she can see jokes. All the same, the description of her as being 'not dedicated' needs to be modified; by the force of the circumstances of her exceptional talent, she has become dedicated, giving more to ballet as it has, greedily, demanded more of her. Ballet dancing of her standard, she has long since realised, cannot be served by half-measures.

She is lazy, she says. So, we know, was Mozart, who would use any and every social excuse to postpone his work of composition until, in the small hours, the excuses had all gone. To





OFF-DUTY

*Photograph by Felix Fonteyn*



AGED 14

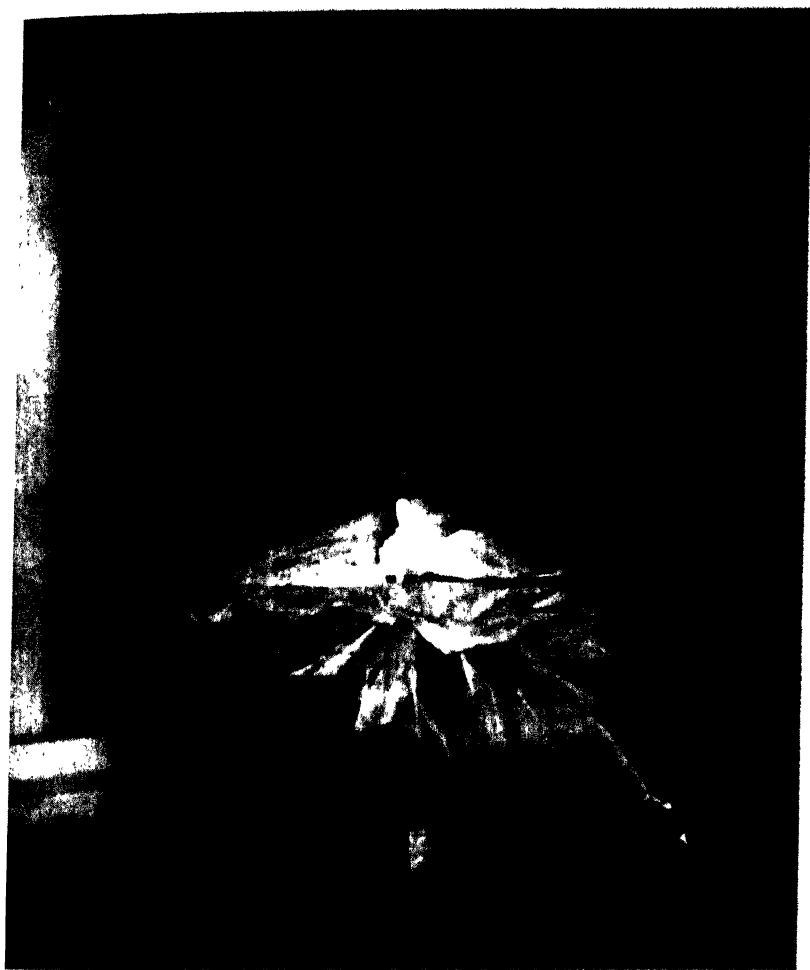
As the Young Tregennis in *The Haunted Ballroom*  
*Photograph by Gordon Anthony*

describe as lazy a woman who, for all her working life, has followed the arduous discipline which ballet imposes on its junior, to say nothing of its senior disciples, is not necessarily nonsense. To illustrate the self-accusation, she says that, for instance, in her formative years she would not really work hard enough to strengthen certain congenital weaknesses and to arm herself with the full battery of a virtuoso dancer's equipment. It is true (if for a moment I may anticipate a later chapter) that she has never been quite a virtuoso, dazzling an audience by sheer abundance of technical prowess, as certain other contemporaries, mostly American and Russian, have done; and it is also true that once, after a particularly lovely performance of hers in *The Sleeping Beauty*, I heard a knowledgeable critic exclaim: 'She is a bad dancer but, damn it, she can bring tears to your eyes'. True, again, that (without implying any judgement of the comparative value of the two methods of teaching) she has said how much she used to loathe the Cecchetti method, with its dry, repetitive exercises, as unexciting as physical jerks or arms drill, and how much she preferred the freer, more expressive methods of her Russian teachers (Astafieva, Preobrajenska, Volkova) with their greater provision for 'dancing in training'. But, after all, any girl of spirit would be likely to have the same preference. And the critic's wry comment (made, by the way, some years ago) was an expression not of cool judgement but of devoted, exasperated, male reaction to a state (his own and others') of rapt emotion. As for the youthful scrimshanking (more or less) of which she accuses herself, what is certain is that on stage she gives no impression of being an incomplete performer; in no dancer have the means seemed to be more adequate to the multiple ends.

But, perhaps, all that her self-accusation of laziness really means is what has already been implied: that she has always been conscious—much more so, at a guess, than most of her

colleagues—of the effort of will entailed by a ballerina's life; conscious, too, of all the other things which she could much less arduously enjoy. Perhaps it is yet another sign of the quite unforced, unstudied refusal of a sensible, many-sided and self-critical nature to capitulate to the restrictions of a furiously exacting art. She remains obdurately normal in her dislike of work and in regarding some dancing and much training for dancing as work, plain and tedious.

A picture of normality, such as this, may also seem to be one of a certain sedateness, of a common sense bordering on dullness and of a lack of temperament little compatible with high theatrical achievement. Sedateness? That is true, up to a point. Although her mother is part-Brazilian and her father's job, as a mining engineer, obliged the daughter to be a very young globe-trotter, and although she herself is thoroughly cosmopolitan-feminine in her adaptability to the exalted hurly-burly of personalities and occasions among which her adult fame has placed her, yet there remains something very English — carefully-fostered, undemonstrative, circumspect, Surbitonian English—about her manner. There is, I think, nothing bohemian about her family background. On the other hand, this first of our ballerinas is Brazilian as well as British and, whether or not this Latin-American strain is the reason, she undoubtedly has a quality of sensuousness and a delicately feline air of graceful, slightly self-indulgent serenity which are not commonly regarded as Surbitonian; and these things seem, however impalpably, to be important both in her and in her dancing. Of course you will find the most un-British qualities in British women of the narrowest breed; and I would only want to mention, not to stress, a possible racial explanation of her particular personality. But let it at least be added that if the manner is mostly 'straight English', the appearance is not; the black hair (glossed and meticulously obedient in public, long



**'LES RENDEZ-VOUS'**

One of her first roles in an Ashton ballet

*Photograph by Gordon Anthony*



‘GISELLE’

*Photograph by Mike Davis*

and disconcertingly tumbling in time of relaxation), the enormous dark eyes, the small vivid features, the olive skin and the small-boned, neat, light limbs—these proclaim the Tagus, the Guadalquivir or the Rio Grande rather than Thames or Avon or Ouse.

She is, indeed, remarkably common-sensible. But common sense, rare and refreshing enough in all walks of life, is still rarer and still more refreshing in a theatrical star. Common-sensible, then, she is, but very far from dull. And does she lack temperament? If by temperament is meant a quality which should be put in inverted commas and which implies a diva's arrogance and egoism, then she certainly lacks it; otherwise she might, in her adolescence, have wanted 'to be a ballerina' rather than just to dance. But if the term may be taken to include a subtler essence—a warm, vital personality but a quiet one, a glowing hearth rather than a roaring conflagration, a will and temper but not a despotic fury—then she has temperament. Obstinate is what she says she is often called by her friends; but, she continues, the real trouble occurs because she is, indeed, too easily influenced and because, when one would-be persuasive voice accuses her of obstinacy, she is only trying to cling to an opinion which she has taken from an immediately previous and equally urgent persuader. Here, again, too much attention should not be paid to her light-hearted self-deprecation. Nevertheless, it is true—and, on reflection, an obvious concomitant to her open-minded reasonableness—that she is, for a ballerina of such eminence, singularly, almost excessively, amenable.

So she is not obstinate, whatever her friends may say about her. But she is serene; and in descriptions of her, and of her dancing, serenity is a word which recurs, most justly, as I think. It may seem inconsequent so to juxtapose this serenity with her 'non-obstinacy', but when her influential friends, trying, for instance, to persuade her to drop or to take up this

or that role, tell her she is being obstinate, what they have, perhaps, encountered is that ultimate rock of instinctive, undemonstrative, unworried certainty which is one way of describing serenity and which (thoroughly to mix metaphors) give so distinctive a fragrance to her dancing just because it is so genuine to the dancer herself. It is an elusive, gradual fragrance but, once apprehended, is realised to be most characteristic.

There is another quality which must be mentioned: her naïveté. In a sense, all artists—even the great executants as well as the creators—must be naïve; whatever the elaborations of sophistication which may decorate or bedevil their work, they stand or fall by that work's simple truth or falseness. All art, in that sense, is ultimately simple; in that sense, too, all artists are ultimately children in their directness, their innocence, their ingenuousness. If all artists are, then, innocents, the greatest innocents among them are the ballet dancers. It can be read in their faces, in that recognisable, unlined, unravaged expression of theirs, at an age when other women, and, not least, other women of the theatre, wear in their features the heavy lines of their years. The working life of ballerinas is particularly short; the serious, distinctive innocence of their faces, intensified and refined by the years, may be counted as time's small recompense.

But in speaking of Margot Fonteyn's naïveté I do not mean to start any aesthetic or other large hares. I have in mind something much more obvious, much less difficult—the fact that she takes her fame, much as she takes her curtain-calls, with such modest and such unaffected pleasure. It would be much too much to say that she is surprised any longer by the fame or the curtain-calls—that would be a folly of affectation—but she remains extraordinarily unspoilt by it; she remains the least vain of them all, the eminent dancer who, without hint or awareness of condescension, will take her place at



the barre along with the newest new-girl of the Corps de Ballet.

Film critics have noted, fairly enough, that the basic reason why Margaret Lockwood and Anna Neagle have been such darlings of the British film public is because these stars are, or seem to be, such ordinary folk. If they can get there, I may get there too—so thinks the nice suburban miss, who possesses a pretty face and good legs. With Margot Fonteyn it is also like that, but with a difference. In the British admiration of her (and be it noted that here I am speaking only of her British, not of her international, reputation) there is also, though to a lesser degree, that 'class' element of vicarious fulfilment, but there is, besides and especially, an appreciative astonishment that anyone so exceptional in her achievement should yet seem to remain so unsophisticated, so youthfully and unprofessionally responsive to the public admiration—in a word, so unconceited. I say 'seem to remain', but the reason for the appearance is that it expresses the reality. That is the point.

No sooner, of course, have I written down these observations than I am aware of the contradictions, real or apparent. The story—true, I have no doubt—is told about the eminent American impresario who knocked on the door of Margot Fonteyn's dressing-room one evening, just before she was about to go on stage, only to hear, in answer to his polite knock, a violent shout of 'get out!' Not, it might be thought, the most serene of replies. But, of course, it is a story which really has nothing to do with the case. Or, again, there is no doubt that in the last year or so she has become just a little bit 'grand', a little more difficult than she used to be. A belated case of ballerina's pride? Not a bit of it. I believe that if, of recent years, she has become a little grander, it is not because she has belatedly acquired a pronounced sense of her dignity as *prima ballerina assoluta* of the Western world, but because

she has become an ambassador's wife. Nothing could better underline her essential and youthful lack of sophistication, her unpretentiousness about her own status. Again, I might mention a conversation some time before the war between her and a young man (an admirer, but also a down-to-earth sceptic about the artistic mystique) in which the young man said that what he liked so much about her was her refusal 'to go all silly' about her dancing and her recognition that ballet was 'just another job'. At the time this annoyed her considerably; she was being told by her teachers and, in her amenable, imaginative way, she was convincing herself that ballet was much more than 'just another job'. All the same, she would admit now that her annoyance was due much more to what she knew she ought to think than to her own honest-to-goodness opinion.

From this sketch, not of the dancer but of some aspects of the personality which affect her dancing, two other points emerge. Both have been repeatedly noted when people have written or talked about her, but they need to be noted again. One is that, of all ballerinas, none has been more fully a member of a company. It is an obvious point. All or almost all ballerinas (which means ballet dancers of the highest quality) are best served by the accompaniment of a large, proficient company, but so thorough an individualist as Pavlova (or even as Markova, in her different way) can make-do superbly with only minimal artistic support. Margot Fonteyn is not like that; she belongs, not only by up-bringing but by her unconceited nature, to a company, to the Sadler's Wells or, as we now know it, the Royal Ballet.

The second point is simply that the influence of such a ballerina, at once so outstanding and so modest, on her company is bound to be both strong and healthy. She sets the standard of dancing for her juniors to emulate; she also sets them their standard of behaviour. Frederick Ashton, speaking

## MARGOT DE ARIAS

of her, has said that the lesser members of the company could scarcely give themselves airs when their ballerina so signally assumed none to herself. In this way, too, Margot Fonteyn—along with Ninette de Valois and Frederick Ashton—has been an architect of Britain's national ballet.

## II

### THE DANCER

#### A CATALOGUE OF SORTS

GOOD, even very good, ballet dancers are of many sorts; their frailties, as well as the strong points in their equipment, are numerous and various. Some of them have obvious deficiencies to hide; there are others (and these not necessarily the best or the most exciting) who, subjected to an examination on the attributes required for a ballerina, would lose almost no marks. Some dancers are tense, others are relaxed. Some are virtuosi, others are lyricists. Some have a capacity for high drama, others for comedy; others, again, can scarcely act at all. Some have facility, others have talent. Some have a grandeur of stage manner and carry themselves superbly; others lack 'presence' and, until they acquire it, do not hold their audience. Some have speed; others are, essentially, elegiac dancers—they have the dignity or the wistfulness or both. Some, but by no means all, have pretty feet; the ugly feet may be strong, the pretty ones are not infrequently weak. The best ballerinas must have strong and supple backs, but the backs of some good dancers are surprisingly weak and inflexible. Some can do everything except produce a consistently good line; others have 'wonderful line' but a wobbly technique. Some keep untroubled, unhurried time; others can veritably be seen counting—and even then they may miss the beat. Some have a magical quality about their imperfect dancing; others, lacking any obvious flaw, lack magic as well. Some have star quality; others have not and will never acquire it, good though they

## THE DANCER

may be. Some have crinkly and others have straight hair; and if I introduce this irreverence into the catalogue, it is because Ninette de Valois has said, not entirely in jest, that it is rare to find a tense dancer whose hair is not crinkly. I might add that Margot Fonteyn, when she was fifteen or thereabouts, was convinced that a ballerina's hair must be dark; she could not, therefore, believe that the fair-haired Baronova, her only equal, as I think, among Western dancers of the last twenty years or so, was truly a ballerina.

Of course this catalogue is not exhaustive nor, perhaps, is all of it entirely solemn. But it includes most of the qualities or frailties in ballet dancing which belong to a study of Margot Fonteyn—not, indeed, that many of the listed frailties can be ascribed to her. But in any one dancer faults and merits may bewilderingly overlap; they may seem to contradict each other. That is why the qualities of a dancer, as of any artist, are so agreeably hard to disentangle and pin down.

### TENSE OR RELAXED

Ninette de Valois is an indefatigable analyst, for ever categorising the physical, temperamental and mental characteristics of the dancers in her own and other companies and continually delighted to find exceptions to her tentative, empirical rules. The distinction between 'tense' and 'relaxed' dancers is one of hers—one for which she claims neither patent nor infallibility, but to which, evidently and rightly, she gives some value as an indication of the likely course of development of her pupils in the Royal Ballet School. A dancer's tension or relaxation is, in the first place, a matter of muscular-type. It could not be said that, in a dancer, one of the two types is intrinsically better. But the boy or girl with tense muscles and the boy or girl with relaxed muscles are unlikely to excel in the same kind of dancing. Very broadly, it

is the tense dancers who will be the masters or mistresses of quick, flashing movement, of 'brio'; they will be the virtuosi, the Odiles of the thirty-two fouettés and the dazzling technique, the soubrettes and, more likely than not, the purveyors of high drama. It is the relaxed dancers who are the lyricists, the apparently effortless movers, also the blessed possessors of the long, easy, elegant line; and those, to many of us, are the loveliest qualities which ballet can show.

It will already be clear (and Ninette de Valois would be the first to admit it) that, although the distinction between relaxed and tense dancers may be concerned with muscular-type in the first place, it has much wider implications; these implications may be gleaned (helpfully but not infallibly) from a consideration of muscular-type but they take us into less well-charted, less tangible regions. In this, as in other respects, ballet's gallery of fame is full of exceptions. I suppose that a random selection of the most typically tense dancers of this and the more closely preceding generations would include Preobrajenska, Lopokova, Lepeschinskaia and our own Nerina. But among tense dancers should also be included Pavlova, the very empress of lyricists; and a category which can include both her and, say, Lopokova—the one all elegance and elegy and dramatic poetry, the other all bounce and Columbine and Can-Can—must either be very elastic or must admit of a wide range of exceptions. Be that as it may, Margot Fonteyn certainly belongs to the category of relaxed dancers—both (apparently) in the matter of her muscular-type and, whether as a consequence or not, in the essential character of her dancing.

#### LYRICAL DANCING

She is essentially a lyrical dancer, an Odette rather than an Odile. It is the achievement of Tchaikowsky and Ivanov (sup-

plemented by Petipa), in *Swan Lake*, to have epitomised in a single role the primary two-sidedness of the classical ballerina. Of course *Swan Lake* is not the only classic to demand of its ballerina virtuosity as well as elegance, pathos as well as flamboyance; all the other surviving ballets of the Imperial Russian nineteenth century make something of the same two-fold demand. But none of the others does it quite so bluntly. Margot Fonteyn is an Odette. This means that, well though she may acquit herself in the other part of the double-role, it is in the elegiac atmosphere, the wistfulness and the slower tempo of the great adagio of the bewitched Swan Princess with her princely lover that she is 'at home'. Talent and application have made her an Odile; but nature made her an Odette.

I have said that, to many of us, the qualities of lyrical dancing (of a Fonteyn and, more likely than not, of a relaxed dancer) are the loveliest in ballet. This is a matter of prejudice. It is the instinctive preference which, in the long as well as in the short run, seems to count, and to someone who instinctively preferred the brilliance and brio of *Swan Lake's* Ballroom and of a natural Odile, I do not think it could be proved that the elegy of the preceding 'lakeside' was intrinsically finer. All that can be done is to say why, in the experience of one observer, it is the 'lakeside' and other similar episodes in classical ballet which have brought the richest of ballet's satisfactions. It seems to me that such sequences are the lyric poetry of ballet dancing. It is a lyric poetry which is epitomised, in the traditional legacy, by the wistful, gentle, muted expressiveness of this second act of *Swan Lake* or the second act of *Giselle* or The Vision of *The Sleeping Beauty* and, in modern choreography, by Ashton's abstract *Symphonic Variations* or Balanchine's equally abstract *Serenade*. 'Abstract' is not, of course, an epithet which can well be applied to lyric poetry—even if it be added that the delight of the two modern essays in abstract choreography

which I have mentioned is in their being not cold at all but suffused with 'mood' and 'atmosphere'. Or, again, the span of lyric poetry covers much more than the 'late Corot' wistfulness with which, on the whole, I am labelling the analogous passages of traditional choreography. True, but the analogy is meant to be only suggestive, not exact. To execute classical or neo-classical choreography of this sort may be difficult, even supremely difficult, but its proper execution does not, primarily, make for a show of virtuosity; and, more than any other kind of dancing, it brings, or at least has brought to me, the memorable moments of ballet, the recollections of lasting beauty. In this sort of dancing and in interpreting this sort of choreography Margot Fonteyn is, I believe, both supreme and most true to her talents and her personality.

Analogy apart, it will be said, justly enough, that I am giving too restricted an account of lyrical ballet dancing. I do so in an attempt to put down what seems to me to be the essence of the matter. It could be argued that in many other kinds of choreography, unclassical as well as classical, there are elements of lyricism and that a really fine dancer, even in those passages which are virtuosity unabashed, will add something to mere technical agility, something which lifts it from acrobatics to a kind of linear poetry. Thus, at one extreme, the Rose Adagio (of the second act of *The Sleeping Beauty*) is one of the least bashful and most ruthless exercises in sheer virtuosity to be found in all the repertory of classical ballet; and yet, when performed, as it needs to be, by someone of Margot Fonteyn's artistry, it suggests, wonderfully, *une jeune fille en fleur*. It is virtuosity alive with April promise. At the other extreme I might mention the 'apple dance' of the princess and her attendants with the Tsarevitch in *The Firebird*, a dance of utter simplicity, most lyrical, certainly, in the delicate restraint of its courtship, but only distantly indebted to a classical conception of choreography and making no use



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of point-work at all. For such things, I agree, there would have to be room in any complete account of lyricism in ballet.

### LINE

The catalogue included 'line', a term which counts for much in a dancer's balance-sheet. It is current whenever dancers are under scrutiny and yet, for all our glib use of it and, perhaps, our instinctive awareness of good line and bad line when we see them, its meaning is elusive. That, I think, is because the term, derived as it is from an analogy with judgements about painting, sculpture and architecture (about which it is used vaguely enough, in all conscience), is used even more vaguely when applied to dancing; and that, again, may be because, in the living, moving sculpture of the dance, the quality, important though it is, is less apprehensible. Or is it not, rather, that the basic meaning of the term is fairly plain but that the practical attainment of the quality seems so fortuitous? After all, it is easy enough to grasp that just as a painting or sculpture requires a dominant line or dominant lines, enhanced either by the emphasis or by the integral contrast of other lines, so the living pattern which is a dancer or a group of dancers will achieve a visible harmony in much the same way. And it is, after all, not difficult to arrest, by a photograph, the movement of a ballet so to illustrate the success or failure of dancer or dancers to achieve an agreeable design; not hard to point out that in this arabesque the line is weakened by the slightly drooping arms, whereas in that *attitude* the slight curve of one arm is just what is needed to emphasise the angularity of the rest of the posture. But what is not easy to discover is why one dancer (or, for that matter choreographer) attains almost unfailingly harmonious line, whereas another, not, on the face of it, less technically qualified, lapses into linear cacophony.

To say that good line comes from the correct placing—correct, that is, according to the classical rules—of legs, arms, torso and head in a given movement or posture is true so far as it goes; but it does not take us very far. For one thing, the rules themselves are subject to various interpretations, depending on the differences, which certainly exist, among even the strict schools of classical training. We have, for instance, been able to see that on several points the Soviet and the English schools are evidently not in agreement. Hands provide an obvious illustration: even in strictly classical movement the dancers of the Bolshoi, when we saw them at Covent Garden, often made little flourishes of the hand, which were evidently no grace-note of an individual's interpretation but something approved generally in the classroom; to the Western eye these flourishes of an independent wrist, at least when executed as an apparently standardised practice, seemed to damage rather than embellish the dancer's line. Besides, even within the prescriptions of any one school of classical teaching, the variations of a particular movement (and therefore of the desirable line) are considerable. If the range is extended, as it must be, to cover not only classroom exercises and essays in purest classicism but also classical character-dancing, neo-classicism and the multitudinous developments of modern choreography from more or less classical principles, a reference simply to the ballet master's manuals for a prescription on 'line' becomes still more plainly inadequate. As, within the framework of ballet (and, by so much the more, outside it), there are various kinds of dance, so there is a corresponding variety of suitable lines; and much as a painter uses line—and not just facial portraiture—to give character to the subject, so too does a dancer or choreographer. The textbooks will not take us far towards understanding what line is right for what character, though (it is almost platitudinous to observe) all the variety of linear character, as expressed in

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dance, will depend on some satisfactory arrangement of emphasis and contrast in posture and movement.

'Line' certainly has something to do with—though it is not to be identified with—the brilliant execution of difficult movements. A given dancer may be able to execute, say, a *développé* or an *attitude* with the supported leg at a particularly steep angle; she may be capable of an arabesque in which the toe of her supported leg well nigh touches the chandelier. Such movements will, in themselves, be impressive if only because they are difficult; and if the whole movement of which they are part shows a harmony of arms, torso and head with this gesture of virtuosity by the dancer's supported leg, then the 'line' will be the more admirable. Good line is good line, whatever the position or movement; but when the conditions under which it is achieved are particularly exacting, then its quality is certainly enhanced. On the other hand, the very emphasis on a single stroke in a multiple movement (and all movements and postures in ballet are multiple) may make for bad rather than good line. One feature may well be exaggerated to the detriment of the living sculpture's total effectiveness.

*Symphonic Variations* is a ballet which has already been mentioned. In it there are only six participants (three men and three women). Though one of the men and one of the women have slightly conspicuous roles, yet the essence of its choreography is that the six should operate as a sextet, the three women, for instance, often making identical movements and adopting identical poses. Identical, I say, and yet not identical, for that is where *Symphonic Variations* becomes relevant to a consideration of Margot Fonteyn's line. In this ballet she and the two other women are constantly required to perform the same movements or to stand in the same way and yet always there is a difference between her movement or posture and those of her two companions, a difference which,

quietly but inexorably, marks the distinction between magnificent line and line of more commonplace merit. It may or may not be that, in these instances, Margot Fonteyn's line is the more correct, in terms of the text-books; but that is not the point. The point is that even in the simplest positions and the least exacting *enchaînements* her posture and her movements have a kind of toe-to-fingertip inevitability, a sculptural unity which are missing from the performance of her talented companions. I repeat it: in *Symphonic Variations* she may or may not be more classically correct than the others in movement and in position; it is likely that she is the most correct but it is possible that she is not. For such breath-taking line as she here shows transcends any rules devisable by the classroom. Is she, thoughtful, teachable dancer that she is, altogether aware of the special linear quality which she achieves in this ballet? I do not think so. Talent, as they say, does what it can; genius does what it must. And in this ballet we are made aware of a quality provided by a dancer who has a genius for 'line'. That she does here show a genius for it is rendered no less true because we know that Frederick Ashton, the choreographer, who is passionately sensitive to linear merit or demerit, spent hours of work on this one dancer in this role. He worked just as hard on the other five, but not with the same results.

*Symphonic Variations* is, then, an epitome of Margot Fonteyn's gift (and it is a gift) for 'line'. But if it also serves to illustrate that good line is the visible, aesthetically satisfying result achieved by a dancer's entire body, whether moving or static, that does not make Margot Fonteyn's gift for it the more definable.

I have seen dancers who, now and then, achieved not merely a stroke of virtuosity but a grandeur of total movement or of posture (hence a superb line) beyond the apparent capability of Margot Fonteyn. Were these the norm and not

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merely the exceptional moments in such dancers' performances, then Margot Fonteyn's line would have to be considered a second-best. But these moments have, in my experience, never proved to be other than exceptional and (with the possible exception of Baronova, memories of whose dancing are now blurred and magnified by the passing of nearly two decades) I have never seen a dancer who quite equalled Margot Fonteyn for consistency of splendid line.

Just as good line is the effect of total movement or total posture, so it depends, to a large if, again, indefinable extent, on the dancer's physique. Margot Fonteyn, in this respect, is unfair competition. There are dancers who are blessed with more nobility of carriage, with more eloquent arms or even with more elegant legs, but, at least in Western ballet, there is none whose physical proportions are generally neater, more graceful and more suitable to classical or neo-classical choreography or to their more distant, modern derivatives. If her line is generally peerless, it is, not least, because she is beautifully made. That is why she is unfair competition: the violinist can choose his or her instrument, the dancer cannot.

## ON BEING MUSICAL

To be musical, in ballet, means to keep time with apparent ease. It also means something more. Some good dancers cannot be relied on to keep time. Others, including a few who, in other respects, are among the finest, can only keep time consistently by an effort of concentration which, sooner or later, is communicated to the less unmusical members of the audience as a more or less horrid anxiety. In this, of course, as in everything there are degrees of incapacity. It would be too much to say that the great Spessitseva's time-keeping was a matter for horrid anxiety, but, according to the more reliable

reports, it does seem that she was deficient in musical sense. This was the frailty which she needed to veil, and did veil in her dramatic lyricism, her impeccable line and her magnificent, versatile, classical technique.

Yet I wonder if, to the musical observer, anything can quite atone for that unease, latent or realised, which attends the performance of a dancer, however accomplished, whose time-keeping is in doubt. I wonder if, in ballet, anything quite equals the pleasure which is given by a dancer about whose time-keeping and the 'something more' which marks her as truly musical there is untroubled certainty. Those who can merely keep unanxious time are rare enough. Those whose dancing is imbued with a complete, apparently instinctive awareness of the music, with a fidelity to its spirit as well as to its rhythm, are the possessors of the 'something more'; and these are rarer still. Margot Fonteyn is one of them. Of all the qualities in her dancing, musical sense is, perhaps, the most distinctive.

Constant Lambert, who used to conduct so many of her ballets at Sadler's Wells and in the earlier post-war years at Covent Garden, illustrated one aspect of it—his remark has often been quoted—when he said that, watching her from the orchestra pit, he would sometimes ask himself how she could possibly move from her present place on the stage to, say, its farthest corner in the prescribed bar or so of music; yet she would always arrive at the right spot at the right time without any outward hurry or flurry. But this tribute from the most eminent of her regular conductors could not be claimed by her musicality alone; it was due also to that relaxed smoothness of movement which has already been observed as characteristic. And it was due to something else as well—to some compound of instinct and intelligence which makes her mistress of the geography of a ballet. Here, in other words, is an instance of the difficulty of ascribing any one visible



ODETTE

*Swan Lake, Act II, at Covent Garden*  
*Photograph by Houston Rogers*



**'LES SYLPHIDES'**

**Delicate, elusive—and finally mastered**

*Photograph by Felix Fonteyn*



and outward sign of a dancer's merit to a solitary cause. As a mistress of choreographic geography—by which is meant an ability to be at just the right spot on the stage for the given movement or gesture at the prescribed moment—Fonteyn is extraordinary and, indeed, almost unique among her contemporaries. Musicality, ease of movement, cool judgement, an instinct for linear design—all these go to make her the expert geographer of ballet that she is. It would be impossible to say which of these elements contributed most to the admirable result.

Again, an ability to cope with the geography of a ballet, while keeping perfect time, may be an important item in the assessment of a dancer's musical sense; but it is not the whole story. It does not quite cover the awareness not only of rhythm but of the music's mood and texture as well—in other words, the 'something more'.

Keeping time might be called a negative virtue. We are conscious not so much of its agreeable presence as of its uncomfortable absence. So it is not quite analogous to a competent, as distinct from a brilliant, classical technique; such is the difficulty of the steps of ballet that even if they are executed with mere competence (that is, without noticeable mistakes) the effect is one of positive achievement. It would, of course, be impossible to draw an exact mark where the negative virtue of time-keeping passes into the positive achievement of a truly musical interpretation. But what is certain is that such a mark exists, however mistily, and that the musical dancing of a Fonteyn is far to the positive, pleasurable side of it. That is none the less true because the effect, unlike some or most of those achieved in ballet, is not sudden but slow and cumulative—a gradual perfume rather than a stroke of lightning. This gradualness of enchantment is, I believe, most typical of Margot Fonteyn's dancing and more will be said about it later. But in this present attempt to

appreciate her musical sense in isolation it needs at least to be mentioned; here, too, it is relevant.

A dancer's musical sense, slow, cumulative, eventually pervasive in its effect on the audience, is, evidently, elusive, if not impervious to analysis, whether the analyst be a spectator or the dancer herself. I do not believe that any dancer, musically gifted as she might be, could quite explain the 'something more' which lifts her out of the class of the merely proficient time-keepers. All dancers, including the most musically gifted, must learn their music by listening carefully and repeatedly to it; and I say advisedly that they must do so by listening to it because few of them can read a score. Karsavina, for instance, most eminent, lively and intelligent survivor that she is from the greatest days of Diaghileff, says that, though she did learn to read music, she used to make little or no use of this ability when it came to learning a role; it was all done by ear. Margot Fonteyn cannot read music; by ear, and by ear only, she, like the rest of her colleagues, gets the rhythm and the sense of it. The difference, then, between her extraordinary musical assimilation and the more limited musical abilities even of her most talented contemporaries is not attributable to any higher degree of scholarship on her part. Nor, I think, is it fully explicable by any words of hers, still less by any words of mine. But, as to the more limited matter of time-keeping, I have been able to question her and she has given an answer which is typical both by its modesty and by the fact that it was, she said, an answer of which she had only just thought. (I mean by that not that she is anything but a thoughtful dancer, but that her gift for music is second nature, not something for introspective scrutiny.) In the first place, she said, she did not count the beat. (This is not astonishing; astonishing would have been to learn that anyone so patently at home with her music was, in fact, obliged to follow this laborious and wellnigh unconcealable method.)

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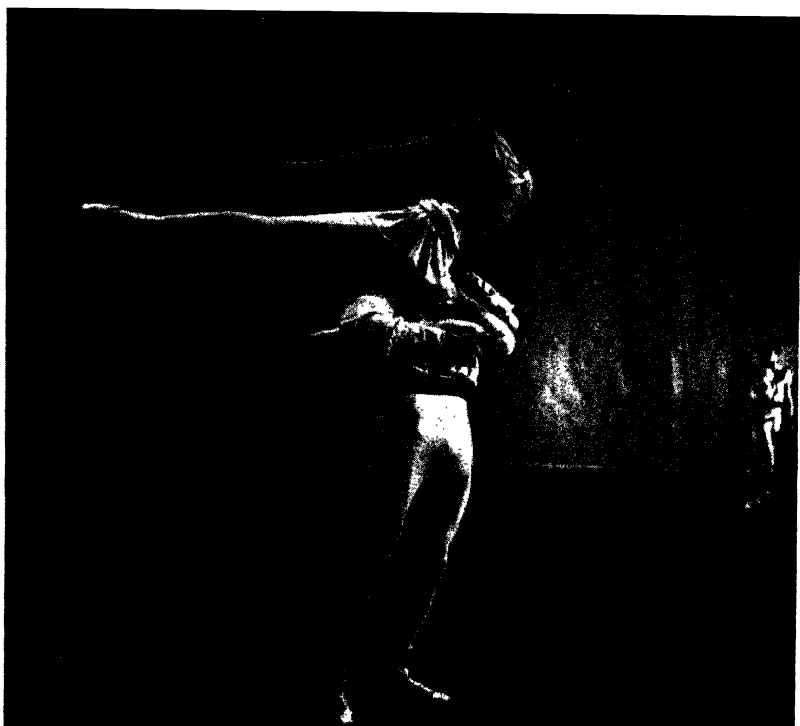
To be able to dance to the given music—even to, say, Stravinsky's intricate score for *Scènes de Ballet*—she said that she must first have grasped its genuine shape. This meant that when she danced she was aware, not primarily or deliberately of the beat (she took this for granted), but of the phrase or the sequence of phrases; she had found that, on the whole, she was so thoroughly conscious of the music's phrasing that she could usually measure, well in advance, the requisite movements, slightly spacing them out or compressing them according to the little vagaries of the orchestra on the particular occasion. She could, in short, listen well ahead. And that—though it gives no complete account even of her time-keeping—does go some way to indicate why she always seems to be serenely at one with the music, quite unruffled by the emergencies, big or little, with which a dancer may be faced even by the best conducted and most familiar orchestra. It also helps to account for the persistent felicity of her punctuation. Any dance by any dancer is, of course, punctuated, clumsily or deftly, in obedience or, it may be, partly in disobedience to the music. Margot Fonteyn's pauses, often minute pauses, and gestures, often tiny gestures, which are her terpsichorean semicolons, commas and even hyphens, always seem precisely faithful to the score; but they also have about them an air of personal choice as though that were exactly as she would want the tempo and the phrasing to be. At one with the music, I have said—it is the sort of unity which, so to speak, makes it impossible to tell which is horse and which is cart; it is achievable only by a dancer who, besides listening to the phrase, not to the beat, and listening well ahead, has a special, split-second instinct for rhythm—an instinct comparable with the eye of a Cochet or a Bradman.

Ninette de Valois has compared Margot Fonteyn's phrasing in dance with pleasant phrasing in ordinary, everyday speech. Some people, partly owing to their intelligence but partly,

too, because they just have a gift for it, phrase their words easily and well, others—and these not necessarily the less intelligent—are stumbling, disjointed speakers. This homely analogy is useful because, especially, it suggests an ability, vocal or terpsichorean, to take delicate, deliberate liberties with strict punctuation—an ability slightly to prolong or shorten a phrase, to elide two phrases or to stress an unexpected pause. If these things are done with Margot Fonteyn's sensitivity, they are the very refinement of good timing; if they are done clumsily, the dance becomes an unphrased stutter. But, again, Ninette de Valois' illustration refers to the effect only; it leaves us still groping for the cause. And groping we must remain; or we must accept the quality for what it is—a complex instinct, a gift, a minor mystery.

Out of the many examples of her musicality which could be taken from the repertory of her roles, I mention, first, the solo, classical variations and, in particular those of the second and the last act of *The Sleeping Beauty*—the one a pendant to the Rose Adagio, the other a coda to the Grand Pas de Deux. To an appreciation of a dancer's musicality solo variations are particularly significant, these two being a little more so than others only because they both occur in Margot Fonteyn's most famous traditional role. In their performance the ballerina has none of the hindrance or help which a partner can give; and, in time-keeping as in other respects, he can be a power, whether for good or for ill. Often it has seemed that a ballerina who, when supported by an adroit partner in the pas de deux, was entirely admirable, loses cast as soon as the moment comes for her variation and she is on her own. And if the variation does reduce her status, that, I find, is very often because it shows up her inadequacy in time-keeping and, possibly, in deeper musicality as well.

Here a distinction is necessary: in one sense almost all



**'SYMPHONIC VARIATIONS'**

Her 'signature' ballet

*Photographs by Baron (top) and Roger Wood*



**'SYMPHONIC VARIATIONS'**

A comparative study in line

*Photograph by Roger Wood*

ballerinas are 'diminished' when they come to their solo variations. The ballerina is the star of the *pas de deux* in which the danseur noble, her partner, can only excel by his dignified, unobtrusive assistance; as against that the male classical variation is, on the whole, more exhilarating (certainly more applauded) than the female one. It is, in any case, true that, given a rough parity of competence, the male soloist, in classical as in other ballet, can give the better account of himself when the dance is a solo. The ballerina needs his support for her grandest effects, but he, when no longer subservient to her, is a creature liberated—he can bound and leap and defy gravity as she, on her own, cannot. When the fine danseur noble and the fine prima ballerina dance separately there is an analogy between their relative achievements and those of, say, a male and female tennis player; there is no doubt about it—the male in tennis (as in other games) is much the more imposing.

When, however, I speak of the diminution in stature suffered by some ballerinas in performing their solo variations, I have not in mind this inequality of the sexes. Granted this inequality, granted, therefore, that the male dancer needs to be liberated from the female before he can do his best, whereas the female, to give of her best, needs—usually though not in every case—the male support, yet there are some ballerinas who, quite apart from that, lose cast when on their own and there are others who do not. Margot Fonteyn is of the latter sort. I say this the more emphatically because I know that it is not the opinion of some knowledgeable observers. To me it seems most evident that just as, in the *pas de deux*, the deficiency of a ballerina who is musically defective may be adroitly obscured, so, in the solo variations, the wonderful time-keeping of a Fonteyn stands out, unhelped, unhindered, unalloyed; and this gives to her solos an almost unique enchantment. Such, at least, has been the vivid impression made on me on the many occasions when I have seen her—first,

the adolescent Aurora of the Rose Adagio and then the regal lady of *Aurora's Wedding*.

I shall mention one other example; and once again it is *Symphonic Variations*, the ballet which must, without apology, recur and recur in a study of Margot Fonteyn's dancing because, as it is the 'signature' work of the choreographer whose finest achievements have been his ballets devised for her, so it is her 'signature' work as well. What is here relevant is that, of all the works in the repertory of international ballet (so far as I know it), *Symphonic Variations* is the most successful essay in pure musical interpretation without story and without any thread of unity save the wholly satisfactory one supplied by the music itself. Subtle, cool, unobtrusive line and deeply sensitive musicality—these are the demands it makes of its dancers. Of Margot Fonteyn's 'line' in this ballet I have spoken already; of her response to its demands on her musicality I would only say that the task and the instrument are here suited to each other in a way that occurs seldom enough in brief sequences of dance and hardly ever, as in this instance, in a complete ballet. If only one specimen were to survive of the Royal Company's British choreography, then *Symphonic Variations* should be that one; but it is hard to see how it can survive worthily without a Fonteyn and, especially, without a Fonteyn's sense of music.

# FEET

'You know—my awful feet', she explains apologetically, and she goes off to pay yet another of her regular, frequent visits to the foot-masseur. When Ninette de Valois first saw her, aged fourteen, in ballet class, small, dark, gazelle-eyed, and, even at that coltish age, neat, lithe, elegant and impressive, the unimpressible foundress of the new Vic-Wells Company (as it then was) said simply: 'I think we may be just in time to save the child's feet'.



Margot Fonteyn had and has bad feet. That is a simple statement which needs to be elaborated and qualified.

Good feet, though important to a ballerina, are not supremely important to her. I have been reminded recently that the lovely Pearl Argyle, who was one of the early luminaries of the Rambert and Sadler's Wells Ballets, had excessively narrow, almost archless, ugly feet; they were, no doubt, a limitation, a frailty, and yet she was beautiful in 'line' and beautiful in movement. But if an excellence of foot is not supremely important, the same could be said of every other physical attribute of a ballerina (except perhaps of her back). Physical perfection, even if it is understood in the specialised sense of 'perfect for a ballet dancer', is no infallible clue to a ballet dancer's achievement; nor has imperfection, even obvious imperfection, of physique prevented ballet dancers from being great. 'An individual singularly lacking in physical attractions, whose anatomy violates all our preconceived ideas of feminine beauty'—so André Levinson wrote of Taglioni in his masterly (and devout) biography. 'Taglioni's body was too short, and her arms too long'—so Karsavina in *Theatre Street*. And Karsavina went on to quote what Guerdt, the eminent dancer and teacher at the Maryinsky, had once said to the young, fragile Pavlova: 'Leave the acrobatic effects to others. It positively hurts me to see the pressure such steps put on your delicate instep. What you imagine to be your shortcomings are the rare qualities that single you out of thousands.' Taglioni's physical disproportions, Pavlova's frailty of instep—I mention them not, indeed, to denigrate these two legendary dancers but as a most emphatic, reiterated reminder that (again to quote Karsavina) 'the ends of choreographic beauty are not always best served by perfect physical harmony'.

Feet, nevertheless, are an important, fascinating and con-

stant topic among ballet dancers, and among others too, when ballet dancers are being talked about. Especially is that so in this country, because good feet are regarded as a speciality of British ballet or at least of the Royal ballet. Feet are a subject of particular attention by Ninette de Valois and, accordingly, by the Royal Ballet School; a general excellence of foot is characteristic of the Royal Companies. In Soviet ballet, by the way, the speciality is 'carriage'; in American ballet it is the long, muscular, athletic leg. Neither the Russian nor the American speciality—nor, for that matter, the British—is exclusive; but each does represent a general tendency. It is odd, then, that in our national ballet, notable as it is for its good feet, the feet of the much-admired *prima ballerina assoluta* should, by general agreement, be bad. (What is equally odd, however, is that in Soviet ballet, specialising as it does in magnificent carriage, the most famous ballerina, and rightly so, is Ulanova, whose neck is short almost to the point of being downright unsightly. In the matter of carriage an elegance of neck matters, admittedly, less than strength and suppleness of back, but any fool could have said that so plebeian a neck as this one must prevent its owner from carrying herself proudly and, indeed, from looking like, and therefore being, a great dancer. Any fool would have been wrong.)

I have heard Margot Fonteyn herself say that she wished she knew what exactly people meant by bad feet. The meaning, indeed, is not always clear, because the term is used with two different meanings. Feet are said to be bad sometimes if they are ugly, sometimes if they are weak. As a very rough generalisation it could be said that the less instructed members of an audience tend to use the term with reference, mainly, to ugliness, whereas the teachers and dancers, in using the term, are, more often than not, thinking primarily of weakness. The meanings are largely complementary. Certainly they are not incompatible, but they are separable.

Strength and prettiness both contribute to good feet. But I suppose that while there is almost no limit to the strength of foot which is desirable in a ballerina, there are feet which, in the ordinary way of life, we would regard as well-shaped, elegant, even beautiful, but which might not be at all suitable to ballet. A long, aristocratic foot, for instance, or a very highly arched foot is good to look at; but it is unlikely to suit a ballet dancer.

The most helpful clues, in no particular order of priority, are these: the ankle should not be thick (that would not imply weakness but it would be a difficult obstacle to prettiness); the fore-part of the foot, that is the toes, should not be long (if the toes are long, they will be weak); on the other hand, the big toe should be big (thus it will give strong support 'on point'); the foot must not be archless (an archless foot cannot stand correctly on point), but, at the start of the girl's training in ballet, the arch should not be high. It is, perhaps, the last of these clues which is most significant: the purpose of foot-training for ballet is, in large part, to create a well-marked, strong arch, but if the young pupil, at the start of her training, is already blessed with a highly arched foot the blessing is likely to prove a mixed one; this high arch in the child's foot may all too easily prove to be a weak arch later on, simply because it will not have to work hard in order to gain the required effect. The raw material, in other words, should not already be the end-product. A strong, high arch is not, however, the only aim; the training is also meant to produce what can best be called a hand-like flexibility. Here, again, if a young pupil's feet seem to be 'ready-made', that must be regarded as a danger signal and not as a reason for satisfaction.

Probably the best feet in British ballet are those of Markova—marvellously flexible, conspicuously arched, firm and correct. But here already the qualifications, if not the exceptions,

begin. Markova's exquisite feet have certainly achieved their strength by hard work; but they did not, I believe, start by being the only slightly arched, not too flexible specimens which I said were the best bet for the aspiring ballerina. They were, I believe, highly arched and flexible from the start, but—the important, exceptional but—their owner did not yield to the easy temptation to be content with their natural prettiness and to neglect their need for hard, strength-giving work. Be it noted, however, that strength of foot means not absolute strength, but strength relative to the weight which has to be carried; Markova's feet may not, in absolute terms, be remarkably strong, but they are quite strong enough to give support to this ethereal dancer.

The more typically good 'ballet feet' are those of Nerina or of Ninette de Valois herself—tidy, sturdy, pleasantly but not perilously arched, hardy platforms for a ballerina's tough exertions and, withal, good to look at in their tough work. But among the more celebrated of the younger dancers of the Royal Company the best feet of all are, perhaps those of Elaine Fifiel<sup>\*</sup>; they seem to be untroublesome to their owner (therefore strong), but their fore-part is unusually long and their arches are perilously high. Their prettiness is obvious and delightful; their strength is a surprise—at least until it is realised that their tarsal bones (the bones which are just below the ankle) are particularly large and, therefore, a sturdy relief to the long fragile toes. The rules, in other words, about good feet are no better or worse than other rules about dancers' anatomies. They are useful as signposts but they do not make it possible to say categorically that any one kind of foot is best for ballet.

Bad feet, like good ones, may be various. But, for the purpose of my argument, they are of two sorts: the ugly and the

<sup>\*</sup> Elaine Fifiel has now left the Company and returned to Australia where, since the summer of 1957, she has been dancing with great success.

pretty but weak. I have already said that certain types of feet, rightly regarded as pretty, may be unsuitable for ballet. By the same token, feet, which otherwise may be ugly or at least plain, may not be plain or ugly in ballet. A ballet dancer's feet may, I suppose, be ugly because they are stiff and, therefore, incapable of the finer, more graceful nuances of movement (especially, perhaps, in the movements on half-point) or they may, for one reason or another, be incapable of standing or moving correctly on point. Both strength and flexibility are needed for really good feet, but the possession of only one of these two attributes (especially if that one is strength) may be just about good enough; it may at least reduce ugliness to inconspicuous plainness.

Ugly feet, therefore, are the more or less untrainable or the badly trained. If they are more or less untrainable, that will be because they are irremediably stiff or weak or both. But, of course, however flexible or strong (or both) they may be, they will still falter into incorrect positions and ugliness if they have been badly trained. And this consideration is, I think, particularly significant in respect of strong feet—the strong feet, for instance, of the dancers of the Bolshoi company, not entirely excluding the feet of Ulanova herself. Some of the Bolshoi dancers whom we saw at Covent Garden may, indeed, have been afflicted with weak feet; but given a choice between two possible explanations for their generally hard, stiff foot-movements and for their surprisingly widespread failure to be placed on point with complete, vertical correctness, the much more plausible choice must be for the type of training rather than for generally irremediable weakness. For one thing, weakness was not suggested by those robust Soviet figures; for another, if a style, good or bad, seems common to a company, that is much less likely to be due to some fortuitous similarity of physical merits or demerits than to the training which the dancers have received. No doubt about it: the

point-work of the Bolshoi dancers was both stiff and imprecise. Little doubt about it: this was due not to any general and natural weakness of foot but to training or the lack of it. And if I am asked whether by that I mean to suggest that the Bolshoi training—that celebrated inheritance from many previous decades—is inadequate to its purpose, my answer is that I do not suggest that at all. What I do suggest, or, rather, state as an obvious fact, is that Soviet ballet training, in aiming as it does at targets rather different from those of Western ballet, does not compare with, say, the Royal Ballet School as a teacher of delicate precision in foot movement. Is it possible that the two are physically incompatible—the style which aims at big, broad, ground-covering movement, at tremendous lifts and leaps, and the other style which is all delicacy, intricacy and fastidiousness? Is it possible to breed a company of strong jumpers, like the Bolshoi, without a sacrifice in precision of footwork? Or is there really no connection between the two? To these questions neither teachers nor therapists can reply with certainty. Certain it is, however, that Bolshoi choreography, both in the new Soviet inventions and in the adaptations of the classics, virtually ignores those rapid, *terre-à-terre* sequences on point which test particularly the training of a dancer's feet.

Bad feet, I said earlier, also include the pretty but weak. Such are the feet of Margot Fonteyn. And such feet, well-trained though they may be, and pleasant to look at, find it relatively difficult to execute certain movements or are unduly prone to injury; or, again, they may suffer from both these liabilities. The case-history of Margot Fonteyn's feet is probably not typical—but then it will be clear already that in any matter of dancers' physiques typical cases are harder to find than the exceptions. It seems that at the time when Ninette de Valois first saw her, at the age of fourteen, her feet had certainly not had the early training-for-strength



**'SYMPHONIC VARIATIONS'**

Another study in line

*Photograph by Baron*



‘LA PÉRI’

A blend of the classical and the ‘oriental’

*Photograph by Houston Rogers*



which they needed. Their training had, in that sense, been, relatively speaking, neglected. They were (and are) nicely proportioned feet. They were stiff and their arches were not high. In other words, they were—apart from their relative neglect in earlier training—not at all bad ‘raw material’; they conformed to the rule that the raw material should not already be the end-product, and their only special liability was that, at that age, the material should not have been quite so raw. Subsequently they received meticulous attention; they did not become beautiful like those of Markova or Fifiield, or sturdy like those of Nerina or Maryon Lane, but they developed nice arches and they became fairly flexible. They became, in short, quite pretty enough, and certainly they were and are well trained. But in those early days at Sadler’s Wells they had to contend with a special difficulty; their owner began, at a very young age, to take exacting, leading roles—she was Giselle, for instance, at the age of seventeen. Thus, for all the care that was lavished on her feet, they were, undoubtedly, enduring tests for which, at that time, they were not equipped. By the young standards of Sadler’s Wells Margot Fonteyn was, in every other respect, ready for Giselle, but not in respect of her feet; in this one particular it could be said that her development was ‘forced’. Whether or not for that reason, her feet have never become that tough, entirely reliable platform which is such a blessing to a ballerina.

She is a considerable artist; she, more than anyone, is conscious both of the frailty of her feet and of the need for correctness of foot-position and movement. You will not find out this frailty of hers in her ballets; I believe that at least in the post-war years her correctness and, indeed, grace of foot have been unfailing. She is, as they say, ‘beautifully placed’—in other words, meticulously correct in position and very well balanced. But she remains particularly susceptible to foot-

injury. And there is a certain kind of ballet or sequence of steps which she finds relatively difficult.

The gift which belongs, pre-eminently, to feet which are strong, besides being well-trained, is speed; and speed she lacks or, at least, finds hard to attain. Of course, not all the ballets, old or new, in which she has appeared have uniformly suited her; but the only one, in the last decade or so, in which she had been evidently unhappy is Balanchine's *Ballet Imperial*. This is an unsatisfactory work, a specimen of the master's neo-classicism at its most exaggerated and most arid, but its relevance here is that it requires of its ballerina a rare capacity for extremely rapid, intricate, *terre-à-terre* movement—for speed, in short. It is not that Margot Fonteyn has failed to cope even with this unsatisfactorily exacting role, but what used to be noticeable in the days when she and Moira Shearer alternated in it was that, in this one instance, the lesser dancer (possessed, however, of stronger feet and, consequently, of the greater gift for speed) did rather better than her more talented senior; and nowadays Nerina, in the same role, does better still.

A relative weakness of foot, then, and a consequential, relative lack of speed are the frailties which she must hide. The concealment, it is true, is achieved partly by a general avoidance of roles which might, in this respect, be perilous. Or, to put it more accurately, the choreographers, when devising ballets with her in mind as protagonist, have tended to avoid an emphasis on speed. But this implies no inadequacy in her interpretation of the big, traditional roles, in which speed has at least occasional importance; nor does it imply that speed is entirely excluded from her many modern roles in the Royal Ballet's repertory. In almost every important role speed counts for something; in all of them, with the exception of *Ballet Imperial*, she outshines her colleagues, partly because—even in respect of speed—she is too well

equipped to score less than honourable 'pass marks', but partly, too, because her enchantment of line, of musicality, of relaxed, easy movement makes so dominant an impression. Speed may count for something, but, even at those moments when it is needed, other qualities may count for still more. That, essentially, is how such an artist as Margot Fonteyn conceals or masks (if those are quite the words for it) her particular frailty.

I used to think (wrongly, it seems, or at least on insufficient evidence) that lack of elevation, or an inability to jump, was another sure consequence of weak feet. But elevation contains mysteries of its own. In so far as it is attributable to purely physical causes, rather than to some impulse of mind and will, and to any one physical cause more than to others, it is, apparently, to the Achilles tendon that the main attribution must go. A short, springy Achilles tendon bespeaks a high jumping dancer. As to the relevance or irrelevance of strength of foot, all that can be said is that it is hard to find a high jumper whose feet are, in fact, weak. Margot Fonteyn is no great jumper. Nerina's feet are strong and she can jump; Mary Drage can jump excellently and her feet, though they appear to be slightly stiff, also appear to be relatively strong. On the other hand, the exquisitely, strongly footed Fifield can scarcely, as they say, get off the ground. Example and style of choreography play, of course, a considerable part in the development of a capacity for this or that kind of dancing. The fact that the Royal Ballet's *prima ballerina assoluta* is no great jumper and that (partly as a consequence) British choreography has not insisted on elevation is undoubtedly a reason why more members of the Royal Ballet have not jumped high. That they can do so is indicated by the effect which the London visit of the Bolshoi Company had on them; under the Bolshoi's influence they have begun to jump many inches higher than they did before. But that is another

subject altogether; I have gone astray from the subject of feet.

To avoid misunderstanding, one other point should be made. From what I have said about speed in ballet, it might seem that I was, to some extent, placing Margot Fonteyn and the dancers of the Bolshoi Company in the same category—both suffering, though in different ways and for different reasons, from bad feet, and both, as a result, being deficient in speed. But that is not my intention. Margot Fonteyn, though her feet are relatively weak, is a supreme result of training in the distinctively Western style (for it is more than merely British) of delicate, intricate movement, as prescribed both by her teachers and her choreographers; this style she enhances with her own special qualities. The Bolshoi dancers excel in quite another style, one of big, broad, often sensational effects which require strength of foot, no doubt, but not the Western, exact delicacy. The Bolshoi feet are mostly bad not because they are weak but because, by Western standards, they are ugly; and they are ugly because they are not trained to Western precision. There can be little doubt that the Bolshoi Company, because of this different training (affecting the movement not only of feet), would make a poor showing in, say, Frederick Ashton's or Kenneth Macmillan's choreography; it is almost equally certain that, in interpreting modern Soviet choreography, the Royal Ballet would not rival the Bolshoi. But that, again, leads to considerations which, for the moment at least, are irrelevant.

#### FROM RETICENCE TO A GRAND MANNER

Reticence is very British. But, be it a blessing or a curse, is it not, on the face of it, the very antithesis of what we expect or even want in a ballerina? Ballet, surely, requires a zest for showing off; reticence would seem to have no part in it. The fact remains that this very British quality or failing strongly

characterises our national ballet and that, for better or worse, it is epitomised in our *prima ballerina assoluta*. So the immediate answer to the question must be that in ballet, as elsewhere, reticence need not be an unmitigated curse. In ballet, too, there must be some good in it.

What, in terms of ballet, I mean by reticence is a reluctance or an inability (or both) to assert showmanship. An illustration was given, vividly enough, a year or so after the war when Violetta Prokhorova first appeared as a 'guest artist' at Covent Garden. This coryphée from the Bolshoi—and one of the few Soviet brides of British bridegrooms who achieved the Westward escape before the Iron Curtain descended—was something of a rough diamond (balletically speaking) by the nice standards to which Ninette de Valois was so successfully educating the then Sadler's Wells Ballet. Prokhorova's positions and movements, in that first performance of hers as the Blue Bird, were all over the shop. Yet, however faulty in detail she may have been, she looked a fiery particle, a bird of paradise; she had 'attack', a confident amplitude of gesture, a dazzling stage-presence, and the girls of Sadler's Wells, in her stage neighbourhood, looked correspondingly like sparrows.

Time, to some extent, changed that. Prokhorova the guest artist became Violetta Elvin the regular member of the Sadler's Wells Company, and, as she acquired some of the British nicety, so she shed some of her Muscovite showmanship. And in course of time the relatively drab Britishness of her new colleagues was burnished by their steady improvement in sheer technical prowess; an inalienable lack of showmanship may have persisted, but an undeniable proficiency in the essential skills of their profession began to prove no poor substitute. Yet, until the day when, in 1956, Violetta Elvin departed, much regretted, for Naples and a new marriage, a difference remained. It was re-emphasised whenever those little groups of dancers from the Bolshoi or Kirov visited

London, in the days of temporarily relaxed Stalinism, and put on their divertissements in the inimical setting of the Royal Festival and Albert Halls. These were glimpses of talent from the Soviet Union under conditions of almost suicidal self-handicap; and there was a nagging suspicion that even the awfulness of their chosen setting would not quite explain away the tawdriness of their entertainment. Nevertheless, all of them (Struchkova, Chelest, the 'student' Philippova) were splendid in their showmanship; the show might be vulgar but they put it over with a wallop. In a much less garish, more imperially refined manner, this was also true of Ulanova when, in 1951, some of us had the good fortune to see her dance, briefly, in Florence. She had, besides much else, the dominating Bolshoi-Kirov stage-presence. By the time, then, that the Bolshoi Company, as such, visited Covent Garden, in the autumn of 1956, this distinctive Soviet quality had been well heralded in the West; even so, it had not lost its power to astonish and to evoke comparisons which were scarcely favourable to our own Ballet.

I said earlier that, as good feet were the speciality of the Royal Ballet dancers, so among the dancers of the Soviet Union the speciality was 'carriage'. Good carriage is not the only attribute that belongs to showmanship in ballet but—at least of physical attributes—it is probably the most important. The Soviet dancers have put over their (sometimes tawdry) entertainment so well largely because they carry themselves with such pride—with an imperious or swashbuckling air that brooks no dissentient whisper. What goes with this pride of bearing, as its natural companion (or, perhaps, as just another way of saying the same thing), is an amplitude of movement and of posture, a giving of full, even exaggerated value to every gesture of the dance. The sum of these things I call 'the Grand Manner', or, more strictly, 'a Grand Manner'. In its Bolshoi version, which is certainly not the only possible one,

it is also a simple manner, due in part, no doubt, to the need for large, emphatic effects to make an impression on the far-away audience in that vast Muscovite theatre.

The Grand Manner was one of the attributes expected of the Russians at Covent Garden. In the event, some knowledgeable observers said that, in this if in nothing else, they were disappointed; they found little or no sign of the promised grandeur. On the other hand, I think that no one who saw the Russians at Covent Garden denied their pride of carriage or their showmanship. There would seem, therefore, to be disagreement as to the meaning and the constituents of the Grand Manner. Argument about the meaning of the term will not be pursued here but, since I am using it in the apparently disputed sense which I have outlined, this brief digression for explanation seemed advisable. I would only repeat that I do not take this sense of the term to be exclusive. The ways to grandeur of manner may be various; more than one manner may be grand.

I have said that the first coryphée from the Soviet Union to join their company made the British dancers at Covent Garden look drab as sparrows. There were exceptions. Moira Shearer, with the fiery coronet of her hair and with her radiant prettiness, looked no sparrow. Beriosova was not at Covent Garden in those days, but had she been—and had she been the dancer she now is—her lovely, fluent arms and her ‘star quality’, ice-cold, self-absorbed, remote, would not have been diminished by the brassy challenge. And Margot Fonteyn, too, looked no sparrow.

If Margot Fonteyn, better than all her British colleagues, could and can resist any Soviet rivalry, her kind of dancing is, nevertheless, particularly ‘Sadler’s Wells’ and particularly unlike that of the Soviet schools. I have said that in her dancing the British (or English) reticence is epitomised. The truer word for it, perhaps, would be not an epitome but an

apotheosis. Her dancing is, most evidently, representative of the British way; the qualities which are common to the Royal Ballet are basically, recognisably, there. But the expression of these qualities is raised to the *n*th degree.

'A gradual perfume rather than a stroke of lightning' was a phrase used earlier to suggest the effect of so musical a dancer on the audience. It is not only her musicality but all her dancing which is, or has been, 'gradual' in its effect; and as with the company's supreme representative, so with the company itself—its impact is, or has been, not stunning but gradual. That is not to suggest that the career of our national ballet has been anything but rapid; to have become the conspicuously leading national company in the Western world in a mere score of years would scarcely indicate a sluggish growth. But, while it does not follow that the pleasure given by any particular performance of the Royal Ballet is, in the long run, less powerful or less stimulating, it is none the less true that the leaps, lifts and massive drill of the Soviet Russians, and even the steely athleticism of certain Americans, are a more immediately overwhelming intoxicant.

Margot Fonteyn's 'gradualness' is, I believe, evident not only in her performance of any given role but in her career as well. She has developed relatively slowly. If that seems an improbable remark about a dancer who at the age of fifteen was spotted as a potential star and at the age of seventeen was dancing *Giselle*, then, first of all, comparison is invited between her pre-war achievements—immature as they were, though suggestive of great events to come—and the contemporary success of the equally young or even younger ballerinas of the de Basil Company who, at that time, were dazzling us at Covent Garden. Toumanova, Riabouchinska and, especially, Baronova were well-nigh complete ballerinas while still in their adolescence; Margot Fonteyn was not. It is a good thing that she was not. She would have suffered even





ODETTE

A pose which epitomises the elegiac dancing of *Swan Lake*, Acts II and IV  
*Photograph by Roger Wood*



‘DAPHNIS AND CHLOE’  
Ballet classicism, Hellenic variant  
*Photograph by Baron*

more than these young Russian contemporaries of hers from a forced pace of development. Even they were, in differing degrees, ruined by it; Baronova's career as a dancer was over, to all intents and purposes, before she was twenty-five, Riabouchinska's fluency and lightness soon coarsened and Toumanova, the youngest and most dedicated among them, did, indeed, grow into a formidable virtuoso—but not, alas, into the artist that she might have been. Yet at least they were, all three of them, wonderful in their hot-house maturity; there was never, in our time, anything in ballet quite comparable with the frail, ephemeral bloom of de Basil's 'baby' ballerinas. In similar circumstances Margot Fonteyn would not have blossomed at all; she would have been blighted even before her April. True, she was already eminent in the young, pre-war company at Sadler's Wells; but that was an eminence among much less talented colleagues and in much more cosseted circumstances. As the leading dancer in a company (any company) she was very young; but she was still a long way from the status of an international ballerina. Even in 1946, when her company came to its new national home at Covent Garden and when Ninette de Valois said of her that 'she was entering into her birthright', she was, as we had later cause to realise, still short of her 'dancing maturity'. That was not to come for nearly another decade. Ninette de Valois paid her that merited compliment in 1946, but has also said of her that she is not pre-eminently blessed with 'facility' (the gift of doing it right the first time), but that, rather, she has 'talent', which (in Dame Ninette's definition) is a more slowly maturing attribute, a quality of head and heart. Other cogent witnesses have recalled her difficulty, during those first post-war days at Covent Garden, in 'putting herself across' in a theatre larger than any in her previous experience. Of course, all dancers, singers and actors find it, to some extent, difficult to get the range of a new and larger theatre; but the

extent of her difficulty was notable. Nor was it solved till the scarcely extraordinary discovery was made that at Covent Garden a slightly increased emphasis, a position held just a little longer, made all the beneficent difference. Others, again, have noted (I speak of some years ago) her passivity when work was in progress on her own dances in a new ballet or, for that matter, in the revision of an old one; at such times she seemed a kind of '*tabula rasa*', a recipient of others' ideas, not a giver of any ideas of her own. Such apparent passivity on the part of some dancers might have meant a lack of intelligence, no more and no less; in her case it was not that—of her quick assimilative brain there was no doubt at all. If, for so long after she had become a star, she seemed so reticent, so passive an instrument of choreography, the reason, I believe, was that she still lacked that self-confident authority which comes from awareness of a lesson completely mastered; her audience might see her as a star, all lessons long since learnt, but she, aware instinctively, perhaps, as much as intellectually, of her as yet unrealised potentialities, still behaved as a pupil. Only in the last four years or so did she acquire the authority which she now has—and at last she knows it—in full measure. By the same token, her performances nowadays have a new or recently new immediacy of effect, though, even now, by comparison with the few dancers, Russian or other, of similar stature, she is not one to dazzle the audience with sudden lightning; essentially she remains a gradual enchantress.

She has her own self-effacing way of putting it: the Americans—Rosella Hightower, for instance, or Maria Tallchief—can 'do things', she says, which she cannot; they are thoroughly equipped virtuosi and she is not. To pretend that she was essentially a virtuoso would make nonsense of what has just been said about her 'gradualness' and of what was said earlier about her natural inclination to the lyricism of

Odette rather than to the bravura of Odile. But the word of one who was the greatest 'all rounder' of Diaghileff's most illustrious days, and who has remained a most sensitive observer of subsequent dancers, is worth hearing at this point. Karsavina has said that of all the Western dancers who have come into the limelight since the 'thirties the two who impressed her most were Baronova and Fonteyn; and one reason for this bouquet to the British dancer was that, unlike almost all her most eminent Western contemporaries, she never made virtuosity an end in itself. Technique for technique's sake was an empty thing; Karsavina would have none of it. The great technician was, in effect, the great artist—one who, like Fonteyn, could do all that the most exacting role asked of her technical armament but who would always make virtuosity be the servant, not the master, of the given interpretation. Here, evidently, was sound common sense from a most authoritative source—the more precisely authoritative since Karsavina had recently had the rewarding experience of teaching Margot Fonteyn to become her own heiress to the role of the Firebird. (The 'curly' subtleties of Fokine's variations on classical choreography did not come easily to the pupil; but the result of teacher's and pupil's combined artistry is there nowadays for all to see in the Royal Ballet's revival, the most authentic revival in thirty years, of this lovely work.) If, then, it is true that, say, Hightower or Maria Tallchief can 'do things' which Margot Fonteyn cannot do, it is also true that, in my experience at least, no contemporary of hers among Western dancers has surpassed or even equalled her in the complete interpretation of a classical or, for that matter, neo-classical role. Be it noted that I exclude, not modern roles which are more or less closely derived from classicism but those which are essentially dramatic. Fonteyn is not an undramatic dancer (I would not put it more positively), but in the idiom of, for instance, *Fall River*

*Legend* neither she or anyone else could compare with that astonishing tragedienne Nora Kaye. Be it noted, too, that here I compare Fonteyn only with other Western dancers, not with those from the Soviet Union. Whatever may be thought, for good or ill, of the kind of wordless drama represented by the Bolshoi's *Romeo and Juliet*, Ulanova's lyrical-dramatic interpretation of the role of Juliet is a wonder, a thing apart. It is, in any case, very difficult (and, for the most part, unfruitful) to draw up an international order of merit among ballet dancers, even among the British, the French and the Americans; so much allowance has to be made for differences in national idioms of choreography. And if the order of merit tries to include Soviet Russian as well as Western dancers, then national differences reduce the attempt to plain silliness. All, perhaps, that can usefully be said, on the evidence of those traditional nineteenth-century works which are, more or less, common property to East and to West and which were represented in the Bolshoi's repertory in London by *Giselle* and *Swan Lake*, is that Ulanova, when she was younger, must have been an incomparable *Giselle*, but that, for the rest, the Royal Ballet's 'gradualness' of impact and reticence of style were not put to shame by the Muscovite drill and showmanship.

So I return, briefly, to showmanship, 'carriage' and 'the Grand Manner'. If, as I have said, good carriage is a prime necessity of showmanship, then a good back is the well-nigh essential prerequisite of good carriage. It is also well-nigh essential to much else in ballet. (If I am unwilling to say that 'it is utterly essential, without any qualification whatever, that is because I dare not forget the miraculous Taglioni, the all-but hunchback of André Levinson's description, the exception to confound all rules). A good back is one which is strong, supple and well-proportioned; such a back is the clue to the correct posture of head and neck, and

of thighs, legs and feet as well. A good back makes everything in ballet dancing become more correct and less difficult; a bad back makes both for unsightliness (in some other part of the body if not in the back itself) and for general and hurtful strain. Michael Somes, an excellent, studious teacher and Margot Fonteyn's most constant partner for the last decade, has, as he says, had a singular opportunity for making a comparative study of her back; it is one which he has supported in countless lifts and turns, in Aurora's acrobatic 'fish-dive' and in Odette's deep arabesque. It is, as he says, an almost peerless back; in so far as the quality of her dancing can be explained by any one physical attribute, her back is that explanation. It follows that the possessor of such a back will, among other things, carry herself well; it does not follow that she will, necessarily, exhibit showmanship, for that, indebted as it is to good carriage, will also depend on an attitude of mind, whether inculcated or natural. And yet a dancer whose back has blessed her with the gift of good carriage will wear, or at least be capable of wearing, a 'Grand Manner', however little she may tend, by temperament or by training, to showmanship of the tea-rose, Soviet Russian kind. It is my contention that, in her gradual way (gradual in its development both through the years and through a particular performance), Margot Fonteyn has achieved a 'Grand Manner' of her own—and one, incidentally, to be so recognised and, accordingly, approved by Karsavina. I take again as my example her Princess Aurora, because, again, it is the most famous of her traditional roles. Her Spring-time virtuosity in the Rose Adagio and her cool, withdrawn lyricism in the scene of 'The Vision' are complete things in themselves, but when she comes on stage, finally, in the full silver and white regalia of the *prima ballerina assoluta* in *Aurora's Wedding*, these earlier scenes appear, in an unforced, almost unstudied way, to have been also a preparation. The

rich conviction of the final *pas de deux* does not seem to come from any apparently self-conscious infusion of stylistic grandeur. It brings with it a wonderful, simple-seeming sense of artistic completeness; it comes like an inevitable crown. It is the crown of a gradual achievement—and, in its own, perhaps inimitable way, surely a 'Grand Manner'.

#### THE PLACE OF DRAMA

A ballerina must act but a great ballerina need not be much of an actress. If that proposition is true, it is because ballet's purpose is not, primarily, to satisfy an appetite for drama. Certainly it is at least a subsidiary dramatic medium. But its language is that of silent movement which, as a form of dramatic expression, is very limited. So when it indulges in any drama except the simplest, it is a trespasser on territory where the limitations of its language put it at an insuperable disadvantage to vocal acting. This, therefore, is the situation: if it attempts subtle drama, or, for that matter, subtle narration, it fails for lack of means; if it attempts simple drama, it may well succeed, briefly, but the drama is likely to be too rudimentary to sustain interest. Only if the drama (and it must be simple) takes second place to the dance (and this second place may be extremely humble), is the proper mixture achieved, the mixture, that is, in which the potentialities and limitations of this hybrid art are correctly proportioned. At drama it is relatively weak; at dancing it is uniquely strong. I do not, of course, mean that all good ballets do, or that all ballets should, conform to a nicely measured prescription. No art works like that. But it is useful to realise why, for instance, silent dramas—by which are meant any ballet dependent rather on dramatic story and action than on dance—are the least durable. They may score an initial success, even, or perhaps especially, a sensational success, but as the language in which they are expressed is narrowly limited, so their



effectiveness cannot gain but must be diminished by repetition. There are, no doubt, all sorts of reasons why a work of art may not last well, and ballets (all ballets) tend to be short-lived if only because there neither exists nor ever has existed a generally agreed system of choreographic notation. But that general limitation of the art has nothing to do with the special limitation of those ballets which I describe as silent dramas. They have a specially marked tendency to be short-lived, not because they cannot be written down but because they are trying to do something for which their idiom is ill-equipped. Be it said axiomatically: to dance is the proper purpose, the impregnable territory, the rewarding activity of ballet; it is dance, not drama, which keeps a ballet alive.

It follows, then, that anyone whose first talent was for acting would be unlikely to choose an idiom of silent movement, such as ballet, as the means of expressing it. That may not be true in other—possibly less highly developed—civilisations than the European, and it may be less true in Soviet Russia than in Western Europe or America, but, within my terms of reference, it is true to the point of being platitudinous. A distinction, however, must be made between dancers who have a compelling stage-personality (and who are, in that colloquial sense, 'dramatic') and those who can act. After all, a similar distinction exists even among practitioners of the 'legitimate', vocal theatre; there are those who vary little, whatever their role, and who, if their stage-personalities are strong enough, may be the most impressive of all, and there are the others who are genuine impersonators. If, as I contend, ballet offers relatively little scope for subtlety of impersonation, then skill in acting is relatively unimportant to a ballet dancer. On the other hand, the very greatest ballet dancers are, without doubt, 'dramatic' in the sense already mentioned, that they have very strong stage-personalities, or audience-magnetism or star-quality—call it which you will.

But if it is relatively unimportant for a great ballerina (as, for that matter, for a great operatic singer) to excel at acting, some members of any important ballet company must, within the limitations of their speechless idiom, be able to act very well; for the repertory must be varied. It must contain works which incline to drama (even though such works may be of ephemeral interest) as well as those which put their accent on more or less unalloyed dance. And the fine, silent actors and actresses of ballet may include some of the best dancers.

Many people would say that Ulanova was such an actress—myself I am not sure about it; she is certainly a magnificent dancer, abundantly possessed of 'star-quality'. Nora Kaye has already been mentioned as a remarkable tragédienne (perhaps as a mistress of melodrama as well); she is also an exceptionally accomplished dancer and her range is not narrow. A few dancers have been outstanding 'all rounders'—dancers rather than actresses in the first place but able to cope with many roles, dramatic or lyrical, tragic or comic, straight-classical or 'character'. In my time—or at least in my experience—much the greatest all-rounder has been Baronova. She never, I think, had occasion to show what she could do with the complete Aurora or Odette-Odile, but, to judge from her performance in the single act of *Aurora's Wedding* (as danced by the de Basil Company) her interpretation of a long traditional role would have been a joy. Her comedy in the little part of the First Hand in *Beau Danube* (for which, alas, she became too grand in the brief course of her meteoric career) was unforgettable; nor can we who saw it forget the precocious, passionate, dramatic lyricism of her dancing with Lichine in the second movement of *Les Présages*. Add to these the Top from *Jeux d'enfants* and the Vamp from *Union Pacific* and her all-roundness becomes incontrovertible.

In the Royal Ballet there are excellent comédiennes; Anne Negus—not, however, a conspicuously good dancer—was



(Top) 'GISELLE', ACT II  
A fine jeté

(Below) AURORA'S ARABESQUE  
*The Sleeping Beauty*, Act IV  
*Photographs by Baron (top) and Gordon Anthony*



THE ROSE ADAGIO

*The Sleeping Beauty, Act II*

*Photograph by Roger Wood*

and Elaine Fifiield is of their number. So, too, is Maryon Lane, though in this as in other respects she has not, perhaps, quite proved herself as yet. Elaine Fifiield's gift for comedy has gone unused (not entirely unused, maybe, in *Madame Chrysanthème*) since she came to Covent Garden; those who remember how funny she used to be in *Pineapple Poll* at Sadler's Wells would agree that this was a pity. Another who should be mentioned is Anne Heaton, whose career, from Covent Garden to Sadler's Wells, has gone in the opposite direction; in *A Mirror for Witches*, for instance, she showed her flair for melodrama if not tragedy.

But, in any selection, however random a selection it may be, of recent or contemporary dancers who were or are actresses as well, the outstanding example must be Karsavina. She was the great all-rounder, fulfilling her high versatility in the Diaghileff Company which, typically, she was not tempted to leave for less competitive splendour in some smaller firmament. She was Columbine and Zobeide, Thamar and the Firebird, Giselle and the doll-ballerina of *Petrushka*. She was, in a word, the supreme actress among great dancers. I suppose that the opposite extreme was most completely exemplified by her contemporary, Pavlova. Pavlova was always Pavlova. Typically, she did not stay with the big, talented company and the varied repertory of Diaghileff; her choice was emphatically for the smaller setting where not only was she without rival but all the choreography was designed for her astonishing personality. Unlike Karsavina, she did not include in her repertory a wide range of (primarily) 'acted' roles. Unlike Karsavina, she was not the chameleon-interpreter of a variety of characters. Of course, had she so chosen, she could have done wonders with, say, Thamar or even Zobeide, but these (I suggest) would have been triumphs not of interpretation but of personality, of 'star-quality'. That her dancing was intensely 'dramatic' there can be no

doubt; she must have been the most 'dramatic', the most vivid, the most electrifying dancer of them all.

And where in all this chequered pattern does Margot Fonteyn belong? Like Karsavina she is essentially the dancer of a big company, one whose career has been firmly (it might be said ineradicably) set in the helpful but competitive conditions of the Royal Ballet. Like Karsavina, too, she is a 'repertory dancer', an interpreter of varied roles. But where I think she is not like Karsavina is in capacity for acting. In a recent foreword to a book of Karsavina's she wrote: 'we hear and speak not of "Karsavina the Ballerina", but of "Karsavina as Giselle" or "as Columbine" or "as the Firebird"'. About Fonteyn herself that would not be said. With her very co-operative, adaptable and tranquil temperament she may have found her right setting in the big company and she may loyally have accepted a wide selection of roles, some of them unsuitable, but what emanates, as it were, from all of them is a constant personality rather than a histrionic versatility. In fact, I believe that, considered just as an actress, she is rivalled or surpassed, in one or more styles, by all those dancers whom I have just mentioned—including some of the relatively humble members of her own company. In this one respect, therefore, she is a little more like Pavlova—not that this comparison can take us more than a very short way indeed. Temperamentally she is, evidently enough, quite unlike Pavlova, that most dedicated and most theatrical of ballerinas. Fonteyn's 'star-quality' is much quieter.

She is not, I have said, a notable actress. Does this not seem to contradict, or at least to imply a contradiction with what was said a little earlier about the completeness with which she interprets her roles, including all the most famous roles in ballet? Here, admittedly, my argument is delicate; it is concerned with nice nuances of meaning or, if you like, of personal impression. But, for all that, the contradiction is

apparent only; it is not real. The point is not that, in her various interpretations, there is any inadequacy of acting, nor, again, that her repertory is monotonous. Some degree of dramatic talent is, indeed, required in every role in ballet and in her roles along with the rest; that is true even of the 'pure' neo-classicism requisite for *Symphonic Variations* and, more obviously, of Aurora, Odette-Odile or Giselle. And Chloe in *Daphnis and Chloe*, to which role she has put her distinctive signature, is certainly not undramatic, as conceived by the choreographer and as danced by her. Nor, in her acting, does she make mistakes of taste or judgement; her mime, if not powerfully convincing, is perceptive, sensitive, intelligent. But whereas many dancers, including some in the Royal Ballet, would be the right choice for a role—comic or tragic or melodramatic according to their particular talent—which needed, primarily, an ability to act rather than to dance, she is not like that; her interpretations are not primarily dramatic and to put her in a role which, primarily, requires acting is to misuse her.

This does imply a limitation. It means that, among other things, she would not be right for Zobeide in *Schéhérazade* or for Thamar and that, in versatility, she is not comparable with Baronova; nor, I think, would she be as amusing as Elaine Fifiield in *Pineapple Poll*. But, in my view, this limitation is relatively unimportant for the reasons stated or implied in my earlier observations about the relative weakness of dramatic ballets or silent dramas as such. The roles which last, the roles which have in them the stuff of enduring greatness are those which depend less on drama than on dance; and they may depend on dance almost exclusively. Even Karsavina's claim to greatness rests, in the final analysis, not on her Zobeide or Thamar or doll-ballerina but on her Giselle, her Columbine, her Sylphide and her Firebird.

Yet, even when it is admitted that a relative incapacity for

primarily dramatic roles is not an important limitation, does there not still remain a contradiction between my statements that, on the one hand, Fonteyn is a remarkably complete interpreter of her various roles, including the greatest, and, on the other hand, that her dancing shows constancy rather than versatility of stage-personality, immutability rather than variety? There are, I suggest, two parts to the answer. The first is that, as already observed, any complete interpretation must certainly depend on some degree of dramatic skill; and I have said that, in my view at least, Fonteyn has quite enough of such skill to give the requisite light and shade of drama to roles which are to be danced rather than primarily to be acted. The other part of the answer is that completeness of interpretation will depend, in the first place, on a dancer's technical capacity to cope with the prescribed movements (in other words, with the technicalities of the dance) and, in the second place, on some special quality or qualities with which the dancer infuses these movements. It is not only one narrowly definable interpretation which will be complete and right; a complete and satisfying interpretation of *Aurora* or *Odette-Odile* or *Giselle* may be more dramatic or it may be less; what matters is that it should be danced with high technical competence, that it should not be devoid of drama, and that, besides, it should be illuminated by some distinctive quality or qualities of the dancer's own. Fonteyn's distinctive quality is that compound of quiet, cumulatively impressive assurance, fluent, relaxed movement, superb line and apparently effortless musicality which I have been attempting, piecemeal, to assess. These qualities do, indeed, amount to the equipment for a kind of versatility since there is almost no worth-while 'dancing' role in ballet to which they are unadaptable; but the visual poetry (there is no other word for it) to which, collectively, they amount is the constant in her 'dancing'. It is in this sense that she is immutable.



## THE DANCER

I have, earlier, used the term 'lyric poetry' to suggest (under one aspect) the kind of choreography to which she is most naturally suited. Here I use it more broadly to suggest the quality which infuses all her dancing. In ballet, too, there is more than one kind of poetry, even of lyric poetry. In Fonteyn's interpretations the poetry is not notably dramatic; Ulanova, both as Giselle and as Juliet (in Lavrovsky's *Romeo and Juliet*) infuses the poetry with considerable drama. And a lot of time could be agreeably wasted in trying, vainly, to decide whether Ulanova as Juliet was 'better' than Fonteyn in *Symphonic Variations*. The varieties of fine ballet dancing, some more dramatic, some less, are, of course, numerous, but I am inclined to think not only that the dramatic element is relatively inessential, except in small doses, but that the quality which is essential, dominant and, in one form or another, constant can only be described as poetic or more narrowly as lyrically poetic. It is this, I believe, which marks the great ones, Pavlova, Ulanova, Spessitseva, Fonteyn and the versatile Baronova and Karsavina as well.

### SUMMING UP

This chapter ends, as it began, with a catalogue.

Margot Fonteyn is not one of the flawless dancers. She has the weak though pretty feet which deny to their owner the full gift of speed. Because she is a highly trained, acutely sensitive and considerable artist she can and does largely hide this frailty; but she has not been able quite to hide the fact that other less talented dancers (though blessed with stronger feet) can give a better account of one role of hers. She may hide this weakness from the audience, but she is betrayed, occasionally, by her proneness to foot-injury. Whether because of her weak feet or, more probably, for some other as yet inscrutable reason, she lacks elevation; she is no great jumper. She is an intelligent, observant and obedient actress but no great one,

and is therefore unsuited to those roles in ballet which depend primarily on an ability to act. Unlike some other dancers, mostly American and Russian, she does not dazzle an audience with virtuosity. There are, as she herself says, dancers who can 'do things' which are beyond her technical capacity. Though already in her adolescent years she was taking such leading roles as *Giselle*, she has not developed quickly; her stage-personality did not, for a long part of her career, show the assurance and positive 'presence' which belong to a *prima ballerina assoluta*.

She is, on the other hand, the most musical of ballet dancers, not only an impeccable time-keeper but able to illuminate the music with an instinctive perceptiveness which is the 'something more' of a dancer's musical capacity. She is a relaxed dancer, whose movements are fluent, easy and unhurried. She has wellnigh flawless 'line', the outcome partly of schooling but, much more, of her own visual fastidiousness and instinct and of her light, graceful, physical shapeliness. Her mastery of the geography of ballet is, perhaps, explicable partly by her musicality and by her ease of style; but so complete is this mastery that it makes her instinct for line seem relevant not only to the linear harmony of her own movement and posture but also to the horizontal pattern of the dance itself; at the precise point of the stage where the grand arabesque, the climactic pirouettes should occur, for their full effectiveness, there, at the precise, unruffled instant, she will be. She has acquired 'presence' or 'star-quality', and if she is not the most dramatic of dancers—neither an immediately dominating personality nor imposingly versatile—her interpretations of her many roles, including the most famous, have a cumulative, rich completeness. In her dancing there is not always drama; there is always heart. She is a lyrical dancer and, among such dancers, the most truly, warmly, touchingly poetic of our times.

## THE DANCER

In her dancing, too, there is yet another pervasive quality, one which has eluded the laboriously analytical net of the preceding pages; it is a quality of femininity and, I would add explicitly, of sensuality. The sensuality is delicate; the femininity is not coy; yet, for all her cool tastefulness and her lightness, she does not become, like certain exquisitely frail dancers, a spirit wellnigh disembodied; she remains tangibly, serenely, damnably attractive.

\* \* \*

But it will not do. The catalogue is made, its items separated, their interrelation painstakingly marked—and it will not do. The trouble is not just that, in the process of analysis, this or that ingredient is inadvertently left out and must then be added at the end like pepper to the omelette. Rather is it that the essence of the dancing itself escapes. Great dancing, poetic dancing such as hers, will not, in the final analysis, be analysed. It remains impervious to dissection, a life-enhancing memory, a remembered image. Words may, faintly or not so faintly, renew such images, but they cannot dissect the enchantment.

When, in the next chapter, I survey her ballets, and especially those devised for her by Frederick Ashton, I shall try to evoke some of these images. Here let me recall only one: that of the conclusion of the *Rose Adagio*. Fonteyn, in pale rose *tutu*, lightly sequined (classical ballet's version of a first evening frock), stands *en attitude*, one arm curved and high, the other held out in elaborate, successive greeting to her four cavaliers, the princes from India, Italy, England and Spain, as, one by one, they sustain her on her four, slow, exacting turns. It is a moment of climax and of text-book virtuosity. The free arm must stay high, yet must not, as though from anxiety or strain, lose its curved suppleness. The supported leg, too, must not sink from its unstrained, taut, confident position. The supporting leg and the foot on point

must be gracefully firm; they must not wobble. But, because the dancer is Fonteyn, the observer is aware less of this virtuosity than of the gay, lithe urgency in the poise of Aurora's body and dark, trim head; and he is aware how youthfully vulnerable she is. There is tension in the music, the dance and the audience. The fourth and last turn is done with the slightest touch of swagger, the supported leg straightens like an elegant clasp-knife into *arabesque*, both arms are raised skyward in sudden radiant pleasure, Aurora's victorious smile is an unaffected beam of joy, all the orchestra proclaims her triumph—and the tension is broken. In the immediate tumult of applause, the observer, because it is Fonteyn who has been dancing, recognises, certainly, a tribute to theatrical achievement, but he also finds himself sharing, delightedly, poignantly, in a girl's April happiness. There are, heaven knows why, tears in his neighbour's eyes and in his own.



‘NOCTURNE’

Ashton's most significant pre-war ballet

*Photograph by Edward Mandinian*



**'SYLVIA', ACT I**

A full-length neo-classical ballet which has given her one of her finest roles

*Photograph by Felix Fonteyn*

### III

## CHOREOGRAPHER, DANCER, COMPANY

### DANCERS AND CHOREOGRAPHERS

FOR Marie Taglioni there was her father, Filippo. For Kar-savina and Nijinsky there was Fokine. For Grisi and Cerrito there were Perrot and Coralli. For the Maryinsky ballerinas of the latter half of the nineteenth century, culminating in Kchessinska, there were Petipa and Ivanov. For Baronova there were Massine and Balanchine, and for Massine, the Spanish miller, the Viennese hussar and the Chaplinesque Can-Can dancer, there was, again, Massine, the choreographer of *Tricorne*, *Beau Danube* and *Boutique Fantasque*. Not every great dancer, admittedly, has been associated with the work of a particular choreographer or two; for all that Fokine's *Dying Swan* became her 'signature' ballet, Pavlova was eclectic in her choice; no one choreographer (unless, possibly, Mazilier) is remembered with Fanny Elssler. But of those working associations which have been close and memorable, none, I think, has been more fortunate and, as time may show, few have been more significant than that between Margot Fonteyn and Frederick Ashton. Not, of course, that on either side the association has been exclusive. However it may have been in Diaghileff's touring days, a European ballerina now claims her title, as did her predecessors fifty years ago, by right of her interpretations of Petipa, Ivanov, Coralli (*Giselle*) and perhaps Mérante (*Coppélia*) as well; Fonteyn, more than most of them, has been the dancer of *Giselle* and *Coppélia* (though with choreography by Ivanov-Cecchetti-Sergeyev, not by Mérante), and it was the Maryinsky classics which made her

famous. Like other careers in the Royal Ballet, hers began on a choreographic diet composed almost as much of de Valois as of Ashton; belatedly but thoroughly she has discovered Fokine and has, besides, made occasional excursions into the territory of Massine, Balanchine and, more profitably, Roland Petit. Frederick Ashton, equally, has worked with other dancers and other companies: his *Madame Chrysanthème* is shrewdly adjusted to Elaine Fifiield, and the cool talent of Beriosova is almost as delicately suited by *Rinaldo and Armida*. His version of *Romeo and Juliet* (yet to be seen in London) was made not for the Royal Ballet but for the D'arnes and, by all accounts, is a considerable achievement; he has worked for the Americans, and examples of his choreography fill the early history of the Ballet Rambert.

Yet, when all is said and done, it is Fonteyn who has made Ashton's choreography; it is almost, but not quite, equally Ashton's choreography which has made Fonteyn. Their careers have so consistently and for so long a time accompanied each other. He may have graduated through the Ballet Rambert, but a quarter-century or so with the Royal Ballet has given him his enduring workshop and his mastery. In that same quarter-century she has grown from a Snowflake in Sadler's Wells' *Casse-Noisette* (her very first role) to the Royal Ballet's principal Aurora and Firebird; and she has grown to *Symphonic Variations*. Each of them can recall achievement, even triumph, in separation from the other; but many of her and almost all of his characteristic achievements and significant triumphs have been gained in partnership. If by that I seem to suggest that, in their interdependence, he has been rather the more dependent of the two, that is, in fact, my meaning. It is ironic, but not altogether unusual, that the instrument should be highly serviceable to more than one user, whereas a particular user may be almost wholly reliant on this one instrument to attain his best results.



Fonteyn has been a wonderful instrument for Petipa-Ivanov's and Coralli's choreography as well as for Ashton's, whereas, without her, his choreography has never, in my experience, had the instrument it deserved. And this, as I say, is ironic, because, without doubt, he has been the influence and she the influenced. Her style of dancing has been very largely moulded by him, and he has profoundly affected her artistic development. Others, too, have done so, and I neither know nor mean to suggest that his influence on her has, generally, exceeded that of Ninette de Valois, Constant Lambert or, perhaps, even Robert Helpmann, her experienced, singularly astute partner during her first, formative decade as a ballerina. Yet, I think, no other influence could quite have replaced or matched that of her chief choreographer in its direct impact on her style and on her ballets. It is an influence surpassing and yet comparable with that exercised on Frederick Ashton himself by Constant Lambert, who was, unquestionably, the most acutely intelligent of that small, invaluable group of people, the makers of our National Ballet. As the musician influenced the exceptionally musical choreographer, so, in a sense, the choreographer influenced the dancer who was his prime instrument.

The records, it is true, show that her first mark was made almost as much in other ballets as in those devised by Ashton. A small mark was already made by her appearance as the Young Tregennis in Ninette de Valois' *Haunted Ballroom* in 1935. While her early ballets did include several of Ashton's invention—*Rio Grande*, *Le Baiser de la Fée*, *Les Rendez-Vous*, *Façade*—I suppose that the first occasion on which the pundits really sat up and took notice of Dame Ninette's chosen, very young successor to Markova was when, in 1937, she took over *Giselle*. Her first 'Giselle' is down in the records—other people's and my own—as incomplete, though immensely encouraging. But—be it a confession of obtuseness

or at least vagueness on the part of one observer rather than a reflection on the performer—I find that these early successes of hers, some, admittedly, in Ashton's ballets, others in ballets by de Valois or in *Swan Lake*, *Les Sylphides* and even *Giselle*, have left no lively impression down the years. There is an imprecise recollection of young success, but no vivid image of the dance and dancer. A part-reason for this may be that, as mentioned already, her talent at the time was so much less mature than that of her contemporaries, Baronova, Riabouchinska, Toumanova, who were then on view in the long-de Basil seasons at Covent Garden. They were prodigies and their company, by virtue both of its members and of its repertory, was the immediate heir to Diaghileff's Ballets Russes; the Sadler's Wells Company and its adolescent ballerina seemed, by comparison, only mously indicative of better things to come. Baronova was remarkable then not only for what she promised but for what she did; and moments from her ballets—the piquant mime and dance of *Beau Danube*, the lifts of *Les Présages* and, especially, the precocious, sensual elegance of her bourrées, with tambourine, in *Le Coq d'or*—remain even now as clear as photographs. Memories of the contemporary Fonteyn, on the other hand, are no more than a blur of adolescent promise.

Let the blame for this fall, as I say, on middle-aged, post-war forgetfulness rather than on the young, pre-war dancer. Yet it is not, I think, just by a quirk of unreliable memory that my one vividly surviving image of Fonteyn from that twenty-year-old mistiness is of her 'flower girl' in Ashton's *Nocturne* of 1936. This was not the first role devised by him at Sadler's Wells with her in mind; that niche in ballet history belongs to 'the bride' in his *Baiser de la Fée* (1935) and, earlier in 1936, the role of 'the lady in a ball dress' in his *Apparitions* was also made for her. *Nocturne* was revised in 1946 for a more mature Fonteyn and for the larger test of the Covent Garden

stage. The revival was brief—too brief, I think. Yet, however much it might titillate our nostalgic old-fogeyism were it now to return to the Covent Garden repertory, it did not, in 1946, quite weather the change in place and the gap in time; it seemed frail for the new and grander circumstances, a flimsier invention than the gay, evergreen *Patineurs* (1937) or even than the dramatic *Apparitions*, which owes its endurance so largely to Cecil Beaton's rich costumes and imaginative effects of stage lighting. *Nocturne* was a ballet of its pre-war, Sadler's Wells time, expressing, as I think, more truly than any of Ashton's previous works, the gentle, unerring musical sense of his choreography, expressing, too, the quiet, lyrical enchantment of Fonteyn's dancing in a way which was exactly suited to her capacity at that time. There was more story and much less complexity (and, paradoxically, less purity) of classical choreography in Ashton's treatment of Delius' 'Paris' for *Nocturne* than there was to be, ten years after, in his management of César Franck's *Variations Symphoniques*, yet of all his pre-war ballets *Nocturne* emerges in retrospect as the most significant precursor of his masterpiece. It epitomised the achievement, in its day, of the partnership between Ashton and Fonteyn; that was its charm, its importance and, a decade later, its limitation.

In stressing the partnership with Ashton, do I, despite the qualifications which have littered my text, seem to do less than justice to Fonteyn's other achievements? I hope not. I cannot speak from any direct evidence of my own of her achievements and development during the war years; I only know that when we returned from war and came to the re-opened Covent Garden in February 1946 it was to see a new national ballet and a Princess Aurora very different from the immature ballerina who in March of 1939 had danced this role, also at Covent Garden, for George VI and the French President. A few of the ballets which had been made

for her in wartime survived, albeit briefly, in the repertory at Covent Garden. I remember her as Ophelia in Robert Helpmann's silent *Hamlet*, a text-book example of choreographic trespass into drama and of the misapplication of her skill. I remember her, too, in Ashton's *Dante Sonata*, a ballet which had made no small impression in the emotional stress of the war years; but its magic, if not its message, had, thereafter, dwindled to a mere flurry of violent chiaroscuro and agitated draperies.

#### AURORA

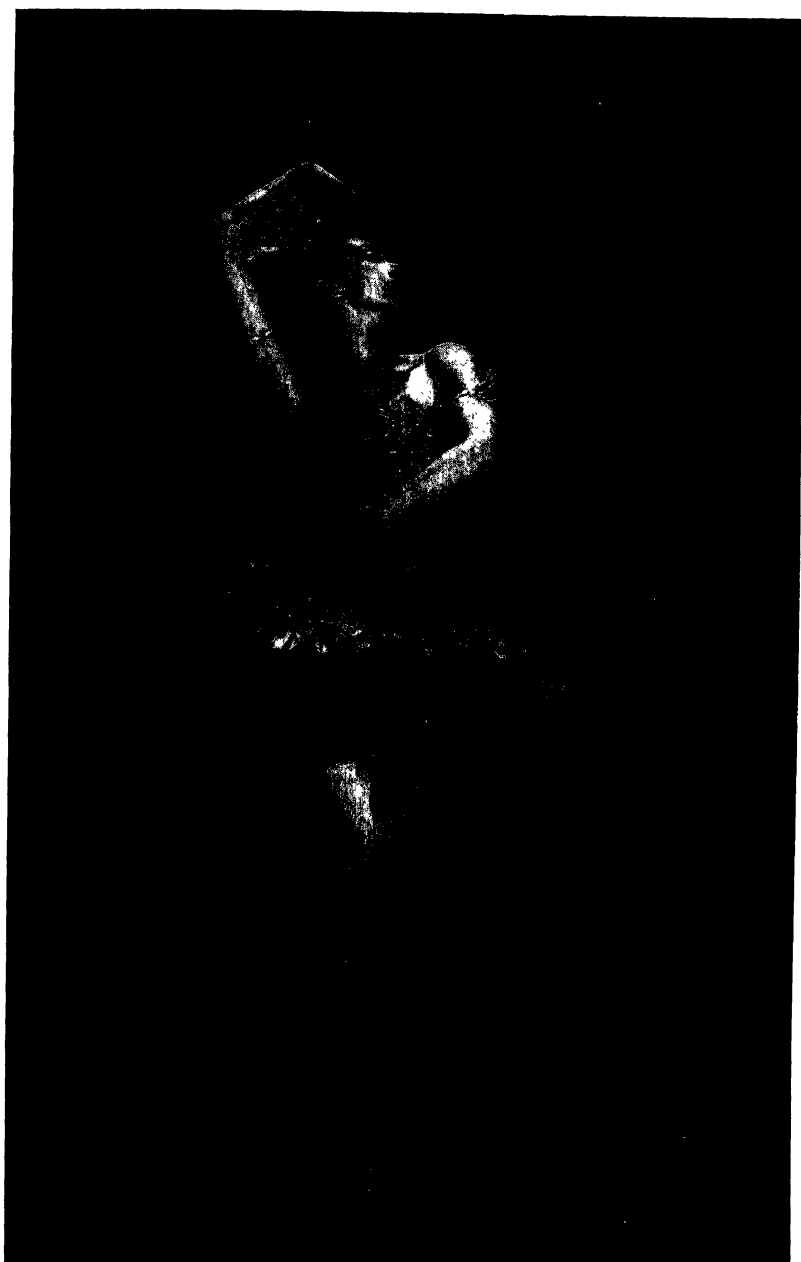
*The Sleeping Beauty* of February 1946 was, of course, an impressive overture to the reign of the national ballerina and the national ballet. And if I stress that it was no more than an overture, that is not to belittle the standard of the company or of the ballerina at that time, but to serve yet another reminder that there was hardly less astonishing progress still ahead. There is a mystique about *The Sleeping Beauty* as about no other ballet, bidding us regard the work itself as the greatest of the classics and the role of Aurora as the supreme test of a classical ballerina. Part of the mystique comes, no doubt, from the ballet's relative unfamiliarity. When the Sadler's Wells Company (as it then was) revived it in February 1939, it had not been seen in Britain—or in any other country of Western Europe or America—since Diaghileff's famous, magnificent and financially disastrous revival of 1921 at Princes Theatre. Only its last act had survived (with interpolations from other Tchaikowsky ballets) in the *Aurora's Wedding* of Diaghileff's and de Basil's seasons. Those bits and pieces of its music which were known to the public remained as evidence that it was, indeed, Tchaikowsky's most ambitious score for a ballet; and the memories, at first or second or third hand, of Spessitseva, Trefilova, Egorova and Lopokova in Diaghileff's

version of 1921 had given it a patina of nostalgic enchantment. Mystique grows fat on unfamiliarity. But, in this instance at least, I think the mystique is justified. I know no other ballet music by Tchaikowsky which equals the rich, apposite and superbly danceable excitement of the Rose Adagio; *The Sleeping Beauty* is, I think, the most impressive, musically, of the Maryinsky classics, and it is certainly the largest and most various of them. It requires the most talent of the largest cast; it requires a particular variety—and, perhaps, a particular sumptuousness as well—in its production, not forgetting the complications of its transformation scene; and—this the chief point—it asks most of its prima ballerina. For sheer choreographic felicity, at least in the idiom of lyrical dancing, it contains nothing quite to rival the long, uninterrupted sequences of the familiar second act of *Swan Lake*; by comparison with that even the Vision is a second-best. But the Rose Adagio, the Vision and the pas de deux of *Aurora's Wedding* have, between them, the most subtle and possibly the greatest range of all.

Fonteyn, in 1946, was worthy of *Aurora*. When she had first tried it before the war, the attempt—like that of the company generally at *The Sleeping Beauty*—had been little more than a classroom sketch. But now, in 1946, the full design had begun to take shape; she was no longer a pupil (except in her own estimation) but, recognisably, an incipient *ballerina assoluta*. The design, however, was not yet complete. It would be some years before she grew to the full stature of the role and before, correspondingly, her account of it became, as it was to become, her most conspicuous claim to greatness. That claim, it could be said, was staked in 1946 by the boldness of Ninette de Valois in proclaiming, as, in effect, she did proclaim when she opened with *The Sleeping Beauty* at Covent Garden, that her company was heir to the full classical tradition and that, by the same token,

the company possessed a ballerina capable of the biggest task which the classical legacy could offer. The claim, thus staked, was acknowledged; but the complete fulfilment was not yet.

When precisely did that fulfilment come? That answer must be a matter of personal experience; none of us can have seen her every performance. I, for one, could not put a date to it. I could not say of any one 'Aurora' of hers that it showed suddenly that she had 'arrived'. From my experience of it, this final progress seems to have occurred gradually over some three or four years, with the elimination of small technical weaknesses, both in the Rose Adagio and in the final pas de deux, and with the acquisition of ever-increasing easiness and an air of thorough self-assurance in the role. But what is certain is that from the start *The Sleeping Beauty* was, in the public's estimation, the ballet which distinguished the Sadler's Wells Company from others and that it was the role of Aurora which, equally, distinguished Margot Fonteyn. That opening night in February 1946 and the assumption of the brightest crown in the choreographic heritage set the company—and its ballerina—apart from others in the Western world. It followed, almost inevitably, that when ballerina and company, in 1949, undertook their biggest international adventure, their first visit to the United States, *The Sleeping Beauty* should be their opening ballet in New York. At home it had become their trade-mark, their distinction; now it was to fulfil the same function internationally. Among the ballerinas of Western Europe and America may be several who could vie with Margot Fonteyn as Aurora; it is even possible (though most unlikely) that some other company, outside Russia, could rival the Royal Ballet in *The Sleeping Beauty*. The fact remains that—apart from the Danish Ballet, good but inadequate to this task, and the now defunct International Ballet whose claims to rivalry could not be seriously



‘THE FIREBIRD’

An instance of Fokine’s ‘curly classicism’

*Photograph by Houston Rogers*



THE FIREBIRD HAS CAST HER SPELL (SCENE II)

*Photograph by Houston Rogers*



## CHOREOGRAPHER, DANCER, COMPANY

entertained—no other company in Western Europe or America has made the attempt; outside the Royal Ballet there is no notable Western Aurora and, among the members and guest artists of the Royal Ballet (Markova was a 'guest Aurora'), none to compare with Margot Fonteyn.

## ODETTE-ODILE AND OTHERS

Yet, in the experience of one observer at least, it was not in *The Sleeping Beauty* that her greatness as an interpreter of the classics first became evident. Everyone, I imagine, who has known her dancing since 1946 would have his or her own particular date and role for that occasion. For me the occasion was a performance of *Swan Lake* on April 13th, 1948, when, after a week's tour of Holland, the production was revised and, for the first time at Covent Garden, she seemed to have raised her 'Odile'—that flashy part of the double-role which was not natural to her style or temperament—to the wonderful level of her 'Odette'. The duality of Odette-Odile is stark; the range is no wider and much less subtle than that of Aurora; the contrasts are much more obvious. Margot Fonteyn has, subsequently, danced better, both in *Swan Lake* and in other ballets, than she did on that April evening nine years ago; but it remains, for me, a milestone in her career—the first time when I saw her gift for lyrical dancing matched by a prima ballerina's mastery over material which was less congenial to her but almost as fundamental to the classical repertory.

*Giselle* (or at least its second Act) was always a 'natural' for her. It was only a matter of time before the promising incompleteness of her very young pre-war interpretation blossomed to the gentle, cool, integrated and exquisitely musical performances of the post-war years. It must be added, however, that—since the time when she came, rightly, to be

judged by the highest and least merciful standards—her Giselle has had its not-quite-satisfied critics. I have never thought that her account of the first Act was outstanding, but rather that she was one of several ballerinas who rendered not particularly difficult justice to this not particularly difficult prologue (for, in order of choreographic importance, a mere prologue it is to the much more exacting magic of the second Act). I have seen only one Giselle who was outstanding in this first Act; that one was Ulanova, in the Bolshoi's production in London. She undoubtedly touched the peasant girl's mime with a little extra truth of pathos and simple character. On the other hand, her 'mad scene', whether by her own fault or by fault of the production, was less effective, because more muted, than that of Fonteyn or, for that matter, Markova, Shearer and Elvin; and, although this first Act in the Bolshoi's production gained much by its almost realistic attention to character, it paid a price by its sacrifice of (romantic period) stylisation. But the first Act, I repeat, is only a prologue to the magic to come. It is the second Act which counts; and here it seems that those who remember Spessitseva find, accordingly, that Fonteyn's Giselle is too gentle, too human, too sympathetic and lacks that air of gossamer asperity which is proper to a Wili, especially in her treatment of young Albrecht, responsible as he is for her lovelorn, premature ghostliness. Asperity, it is true, does not come easily to Fonteyn's dancing, and those who remember Spessitseva may have the right to their invidious comparison. For my part I have seen no Giselle whose interpretation contained the quality attributed to Spessitseva and cannot, therefore, say how satisfactory it would be; nor have I seen anyone who excelled Fonteyn in the role. I utter that judgement, being unaware neither of Giselle as performed by Markova—that ethereal, meticulous, dedicated but, to my taste, unemotional dancer—nor of Giselle as performed by Ulanova. When we

saw Ulanova in London, her *Giselle* (in the second Act) was a marvel of expressive dancing. But, frankly, she seemed old for it, as she had not seemed at all in the first Act; her *wili* bore the years' occasional, tell-tale signs of strain. She was, of course, dancing in a company of prodigious jumpers; the relative lack of elevation which was one of her limitations in Act II—and a sign, surely, of the encroaching years—was the more unkindly noticeable. Fonteyn, I have said before, is no great jumper, but even though high, long jetés are required of *Giselle* (they were, apparently, a speciality of Carlotta Grisi's), this insufficiency of hers has not been noticeable in the Royal Ballet's relatively earth-bound production. Whether or not it will be noticeable now that the young people of the Royal Ballet are trying to jump like Yevdokimov and Struchkova is another matter.

*Coppélia* was one of the first classics to be taken up by the young company in its pre-war time at Sadler's Wells. In the new, post-war order of things, Ninette de Valois revised and revived it for the junior company (at Sadler's Wells) to a delightfully gay and lively production. Meanwhile, at Covent Garden, it had become the only weary item in the senior company's collection of classics. Again, a revision (with new décor by Osbert Lancaster) changed all that. At Covent Garden as at Sadler's Wells it has taken on a new vivacity—with a wide selection of Swanildas, among them being Fonteyn. After an early introduction to the role, she had, for many years, avoided it; its extensive, rather laboured, comic mime and the bitterness of its dancing did not, she felt, suit her. It is indeed foreseeable that Elaine Fifield and Maryon Lane (the latest aspirant to the role), both of whom are natural comediennes, will, before long, be almost as satisfactory a Swanilda as she has been. Nevertheless, she has made a distinct success of it, with the gradual increase in her self-assurance and, consequently, in her ability to infuse even

a relatively uncongenial role with that warm, musical lyricism which is her hall-mark. Here, too, it is she who has set the standard.

# RUSSIANS AND A FRENCHMAN

Massine's choreography has given her little or nothing. *Mam'zelle Angot* (devised for the American Ballet Theatre in 1943 and taken over by the Royal Ballet in 1947) is a jolly kaleidoscope but it owes much more to Lecocq's light, bright second-empire score and to Derain's flower-garden of colours than to any inventiveness of choreography; the role of Mam'zelle Angot herself is unexacting and Fonteyn, quite rightly, has dropped it. *Le Tricorne*, which was so warmly and deservedly welcomed to the repertory, has not proved a triumph for the company, mainly for lack of anyone to succeed Massine himself as the miller. Fonteyn has looked prettily Spanish as the miller's wife and, being a mistress in the art of timing, has done better than her colleagues at the very precise, intricate, Iberian movements; but the miller's wife is not the role which can bring *Le Tricorne* to life.

Of the other choreographers who made their name under Diaghileff, Balanchine has contributed only one work—*Ballet Imperial*—to Margot Fonteyn's repertory; and, in the preceding chapter, enough has been said about that unsatisfactory incident. About Fokine's choreography I have said that Fonteyn discovered it 'belatedly but thoroughly'. The mazurka in *Les Sylphides* was, in fact, one of her first solo parts. She used to dance Columbine in *Carnaval*. During the war and after it she was the girl in *Le Spectre de la Rose*. More recently she has returned to *Les Sylphides*, now in the solo valse and pas de deux, and more recently still she has become the Firebird and the doll-ballerina of *Petrushka*. On the face of it, she would seem to have done a fairly continuous



**'BIRTHDAY OFFERING' WITH MICHAEL SOMES**

Excellent line in a complicated arabesque

*Photograph by Roger Wood*



**'LA PÉRI' WITH MICHAEL SOMES**  
Another superb arabesque in an Ashton ballet

*Photograph by Houston Rogers*

stint of Fokine's choreography. Why, then, did I say that she had discovered it 'belatedly'?

The fact is, of course, that *Les Sylphides* has passed into the repertory of almost every West European and American Company, and that *Petrushka*, *Carnaval* and *Le Spectre de la Rose* (to say nothing of *The Polovtsian Dances* and *Schéhérazade*) also recur intermittently. In short, Fokine's choreography, which started modern ballet, has become part of the common heritage. That this should happen was inevitable, and, to say the least, is no matter for regret. What is, however, regrettable is that his ballets, especially the ever-revived *Sylphides*, have so often suffered from more or less unwitting mutilation in their modern performance. Such is the testimony of dancers, like Karsavina and Tchernicheva, who were in the original productions, and of other reliable witnesses of the Diaghileff seasons. Were more people alive to-day to remember the Maryinsky productions of *The Sleeping Beauty* and *Swan Lake*, we might, of course, hear from them a similar tale about the modern mutilation of those classics. And yet it does seem that Fokine has suffered a fate which is common to the point of normality among masters of the day-before-yesterday, masters, that is, who are no longer up-to-date but who are not quite old enough for their work to have crystallised into a more or less immutable tradition. It does seem evident, that since Fokine, steeped as he was in the tradition of the classical, Tsarist ballet, was the first notable choreographer to take liberties with that tradition, so it has been particularly difficult for dancers and teachers, in the years since the direct line from the Maryinsky through Diaghileff was broken, to appreciate and assimilate the nuance, often the very subtle nuance, of his revolutionary intentions of fifty years ago. *Les Sylphides*, for instance, is only too readily treated as just another nineteenth-century classic (if rather a peculiar one); and certain it is that the ballerina who can give

what seems to be a thoroughly competent account even of the lyricism of, say, *Swan Lake*, Act II, is often awry in the valse or prelude of *Les Sylphides*, where virtuosity is more thoroughly submerged than ever it was in the conceptions of Petipa and Ivanov to a delicate, unobtrusive elegy.

The dancers of the Royal Ballet, when they were the Sadler's Wells Company and even before that when they were 'the Vic-Wells', did their dutiful best by Fokine; and Margot Fonteyn did so too along with, and rather better than, the rest. But it was not till Tchernicheva and Grigorieff produced *Firebird* for them in 1954 that they began to give a really impressive account of the choreography of the first modern master. I doubt if, even now, their *Sylphides* would quite get the master's seal of approval (I remember an appallingly messy performance early in 1957, without Fonteyn); but he would surely have approved at least of Fonteyn for her beautiful dancing in that first, revised and seemingly authentic performance of 1955. As to the Royal Ballet's *Firebird*, I have said earlier that it is, by general agreement, the most authentic revival of the last thirty years or so. It is one of the loveliest things in all the company's repertory and, whatever difficulties Fonteyn may have found in acquiring from Karsavina Fokine's 'curly' variants on the classical movements, she has certainly proved, in the end, an adroit and rewarding pupil. Witness the pathetic, wonderfully controlled fluttering of her arms in that initial pas de deux with Michael Somes. *The Firebird* (provided that Fonteyn is in the cast) has become one of the items to be included in an ideal programme of our National Ballet; the pity is that the British dancers have, so far, been unable to show this very Russian ballet to Moscow.

I wish I could have seen Fonteyn in *Les Demoiselles de la Nuit*, the ballet which Roland Petit made for her in 1948 during her season with his company in Paris. I have seen it



with Colette Marchand as Agathe, the role designed for Fonteyn, and it was then clear enough that here was a role which, in its chic, sophisticated, individual way was typical of its inventor and yet—by an oblique stroke of imaginative insight—might well have been right for our prima ballerina. The faults in Petit's choreography are, as a rule, glaring; like Gershwin, as a composer, he, as a choreographer, has lacked the hard training which ultimately turns a bundle of bright ideas into a work of sustained professional merit; and his lack of musical sense allows him to do unwittingly horrible things to a score. All the same, he is one of the very few truly inventive choreographers of our time; he sees theatrical possibilities to which more professional and more conventional choreographers are blind. When he saw Agathe's sensual, feline, slightly decadent role as right for Fonteyn, he saw possibilities which had escaped the rest of us. That he was correct in his idiosyncratic judgement was borne out by the, apparently, startling success of *Les Demoiselles de la Nuit* only when Fonteyn was in the cast.

#### NINETTE DE VALOIS

I said that Margot Fonteyn began her career on a choreographic diet consisting almost as much of de Valois as of Ashton. She also took her turn at Robert Helpmann's war-time ballets, which were like those invented by Ninette de Valois in at least their insistence on drama and narrative. Since 1946 Ninette de Valois has made only one new contribution to her company's repertory; and in that work, *Don Quixote*, Fonteyn was a heavily and brazenly made-up Dulcinea. But beyond a few movements, ingenious, undulating and seductive, this Dulcinea had little to do and it was hard to put aside the thought that her participation was a gesture of submissive devotion rather than the expression of

a belief that the role was suitable. The role was not suitable. Indeed, if an unimportant exception or two be admitted from Fonteyn's days of apprenticeship at Sadler's Wells, she has never been really well suited by any role in a de Valois ballet—nor, for that matter, in a ballet by Robert Helpmann. Both Helpmann and de Valois are, or have been, choreographers of drama and narrative; that, in essence, is the reason why their ballets are not right for Fonteyn. And when you come to think of it there is, in de Valois' choreography, a second reason: *Checkmate* is, I believe, the only one of her works in which the chief role is not masculine. In *Checkmate* June Brae, Pamela May and, recently, Beriosova have been notable, successively, as the pitiless, fatal Black Queen; in all the others it is the man who has mattered much more—Dolin, Helpmann and Hart as Satan in *Job*, Helpmann as the Rake and, again, the incorrigible, irresistible, over-dominant and funny Helpmann as Mr. O'Reilly in *The Prospect Before Us*.

It might seem, therefore, that since Margot Fonteyn is primarily my theme, further words about Ninette de Valois' choreography would be an irrelevant digression. But that is not so.

It is much to be hoped that Ninette de Valois will produce more ballets; and, such is the vitality of this exceptionally energetic and versatile woman even in times of recurrent ill-health, the hope may yet be fulfilled. It must, however, be taken as more likely that her choreographic work is now behind her. After all, *Job*, which is her masterpiece, was composed even before the dawn of the Vic-Wells Ballet's existence and, it should be remembered, she had already begun in 1935 to share with Frederick Ashton the duties of choreographer for her company. A glance at a chronological list of the company's new ballets shows the pattern: at first almost nothing except works by de Valois, then, in 1935, when Ashton became 'resident choreographer', a rough balance for

a year or two between her and him and, by about 1937, a pronounced tilting of the scales to his side.

Most of her choreography, therefore, is some two decades old. But if it is true that, as I said earlier, there must be a place for dramatic and narrative ballets in the repertory of a representative company—ephemeral though the life of such ballets may tend to be—then de Valois' ballets have had and, to some extent, still have a special function in the Royal Ballet's repertory. What has, perhaps, been most remarkable in her remarkable career—which means in her character—has been her tenacious clarity of purpose. The purpose was, and is, to build, solidly, a British National Ballet. To begin (in the early 'thirties) to carry out this purpose it was necessary, among half a dozen other intractable necessities, to give to the embryonic company some distinctive choreography of its own. No other choreographer being then in sight (or, at least, none whom she considered suitable in talent and maturity), she carried this burden along with all the rest. It would, of course, be idiotic to suggest that, to an artist such as she is, this was an unwelcome part of her burden. Idiotic also to pretend that it was only cool calculation and not natural inclination as well which led her, after or along with experiments on more modernistic lines, to specialise in such big, inalienably British (and dramatic) subjects as Blake's *Book of Job*, Hogarth's *Rake's Progress* and, more light-heartedly, Rowlandson's ebullient eighteenth century. Nevertheless, *Job* (even though it anticipated the Vic-Wells Ballet by a year or so), *The Rake* and *The Prospect Before Us*—and in an only slightly diluted fashion, *Checkmate* and *Don Quixote*—were part of her national as distinct from her private artistic purpose. They have all belonged to her conception of the sort of specifically British ballet which was necessary to the young national company. If, then, she has allowed her choreographic output to dwindle, that, I believe, is not only because she has

been so infernally busy with the running of two ballet companies and a ballet school, but also because, in her opinion, new works of hers were no longer needed to keep the balance in the repertory. Ten years ago she could consider that the counterweight to the predominantly neo-classical ballets of 'the principal choreographer', Frederick Ashton, was more or less adequately maintained by her own surviving dramas plus Robert Helpmann's new or recent *Hamlet*, *Miracle in the Gorbals* and *Adam Zero*. Subsequently, with the expansion of the company's own capacity, also with the renewed availability of foreign 'guest' choreographers and, finally, with the arrival of a new British choreographer or two, she may well have thought that worries about a sufficiently varied (and, consequently, balanced) repertory could, for the time being, be put at rest.

What emerges from this brief sketch of her thinking about the Royal Ballet's repertory (apart from the revival of nineteenth- or twentieth-century 'classics') is, I trust, an impression of her considerable modesty about her own place in the choreographic scheme. In 1935 she chose her man; by 1938, or thereabouts, she was sure of him and, thereafter, she has been content to be at most an occasional contributor—she, more downrightly, would call it a stop-gap—until she has seen herself as superfluous even for that role of relative humility.

None of this, of course, excludes the possibility that at times she may have judged wrongly in her choice of choreography and choreographer. As to that, I suppose the hottest argument still is about her reluctance or failure, twenty-two years ago, to keep Antony Tudor as a choreographer at Sadler's Wells. On the face of it, this loss of an aspiring and talented choreographer to Sadler's Wells, and, as an ultimate consequence, to British ballet altogether, must remain a matter for regret. But such things must be seen in their con-

text. 'Madame', at the time, saw it as a straight choice between the more mature and proven Ashton and the young, relatively ignorant and semi-trained choreographer of the Ballet Rambert's *Planets*, *Lysistrata* and other interesting juvenilia; she saw, too, that as between her own and Ashton's choreography there was a contrast, a lively, debatable contrast of styles, whereas Tudor's and her own were similar to each other—dangerously so in a company which must, if her plans for it were to be fulfilled, carry a varied repertory. And she considered that she had not the money to maintain three makers of new ballets. Certainly it is sad that *Lilac Garden* and *Pillar of Fire* should have been lost to our national ballet, and yet, in choosing as she did between Ashton and Tudor, 'Madame', surely, has been richly justified by time. The choreographer of her choice has taken the company down the supremely rewarding road—as I consider it—of neo-classicism; the other, an explorer of the indeterminate territory between dance and drama, has proved to be a maker of some interesting ballets but not a guide down any firm, enduring road. Such a judgement is, I know, unfair to Tudor since it takes no account of what line his choreography might have pursued had he stayed at Sadler's Wells. But already, in 1935, he, like Ashton, had given his indications. (It is, in any case, difficult to be altogether fair about history's 'might have beens'; events must count more than unrealised possibilities.) The question remains: even admitting the impecuniousness of the Sadler's Wells Ballet at the time, was so absolute a choice necessary, or, if choice there had to be, then why between Ashton's choreography and that of Tudor rather than between Tudor's and her own? As to the second part of the question I would say that, modest though Ninette de Valois may be and may have been about the place of her own choreography in her general scheme, it would have been rather too much to expect that, at that time at least, she

should have been modest to the point of total self-abnegation; and, once again, whatever Tudor might have contributed to our national ballet, she was undoubtedly right in thinking that she, as choreographer too, could contribute a great deal. That she has proved. And if the question is taken as a whole, it is only possible to answer now that the loss of Tudor was certainly regrettable, that it may or may not have been avoidable, and that our national ballet has done very well without him. A valuable egg may have been wasted but a fine dish was made.

Ninette de Valois, as her colleagues admit, is sometimes unreasonable. But her unreasonable intuitions have usually—and sometimes exasperatingly—proved right in the end. Not that there was anything unreasonable about her choice of Frederick Ashton in 1935. She was a careful punter, backing form. But it was not, I suggest, reasonable to suppose at that date that the form would turn out quite so rewarding. Nor, I suggest, was it reasonable to foresee that the form of her chosen choreographer would be so enhanced by the dark, reserved little fifteen-year-old who was then a promising (admittedly, a very promising) newcomer to *Les Rendez-vous* and *Façade*. I cannot swear that 'Madame' then had an intuitive glimpse of the future value of this partnership to dancer, choreographer and company. But I would not put it past her.

#### ASHTON AND FONTEYN

I have now written about Margot Fonteyn's attainments in other ballets besides those of Frederick Ashton. In mentioning briefly Ninette de Valois' choreographic contribution to the Royal Ballet, I have tried to suggest the importance of that contribution to the maintenance of a balanced repertory; I have also indicated, at least marginally (though not by any

means doing full justice to her extraordinary achievement), that if any one person has been the maker of our national ballet, that person is Ninette de Valois. That she has curtly denied this—‘it takes more than one to make a ballet company’—is characteristic, but it is not evidence.

The fact remains that the most significant achievement, the most fruitful success of the Royal Ballet is in the partnership between Frederick Ashton and Margot Fonteyn. To say this is not to deny the necessity of a varied repertory or to forget that, at least in Europe, an enduring company and its prima ballerina must be able to subdue fierce competition in performance of the classics. But the company which, however talented, has no more than that to offer, is atrophied if not dead. A variety and balance of choreography are all very well, but conspicuous amid the variety and heavy in the scales must be some one dominant style of ballet; performance of the classics provides a certificate of qualifications, but the qualifications need to be applied to new tasks. Ashton's choreography has set the dominant style; in the new tasks set by him Fonteyn has been the chief executant.

Ashton, in his youth and even in his maturity, has indulged in various choreographic extravagances. *Wedding Bouquet* was one of them (in a vein of chic iconoclasm), *Les Illuminations* (made for the New York City Ballet) was another and less agreeable example. *Façade*, too, is a kind of fashionable charade but it is so full of a genuine elegance of choreographic wit that—against all the prognostics—it has settled down to a long life; never was there a ballet which seemed so limited to its brief moment of fashion but which has, nevertheless, proved to be so obdurately vital. Yet, putting aside such excursions into modish fun, the essence of Ashton's choreography is its neo-classicism. What exactly does that mean? It means that, in the first place, his choreographic style, when he is taking himself seriously, is profoundly,

devotedly and even fanatically founded on the nineteenth-century classics; it means, too, that he is, passionately, a choreographer of dance as distinct from mime and drama. And, having said that, I am aware that such an explanation leaves out a quality which is also most characteristic of his choreography when it is not being flippant: I mean the emotion which permeates his arrangement of what, otherwise, might be mere classroom exercises. That being his kind of choreography, it is easy, from my earlier observations about Margot Fonteyn's dancing, to see why the one is so particularly suited to the other. *Symphonic Variations*—I have repeated it *ad nauseam*—is his and her masterpiece. In no other work has he so completely expressed his most cherished artistic aspirations; none, by the same token, has so completely belonged to his ballerina. Yet in all his post-war ballets, apart from those which are just time-off for games, something of the same quality occurs and, when it does so, it is nearly always personified in her.

*Cinderella*, which was the first of his two essays in the formidable idiom of a full, three-act classical ballet, is always competent and frequently wearisome, not from any failure of Ashton's craftsmanship but because the thin, acidulous texture of Prokofiev's score is thoroughly deterrent to choreographic inspiration; it is, indeed, an obviously rhythmic and therefore danceable score, but, except in one fairly brief passage, it does not mellow to the tuneful felicity which encourages and decorates a more than merely workmanlike choreography. Musically, and therefore choreographically, too, tedium sets in, principally, in the long second Act, that of the ball; but that Act also contains the one shining exception, the *pas de deux* for Cinderella and her prince, where, to an accompaniment turned quite suddenly from dusty dryness to a bitter-sweetness of harp and strings, Ashton has provided a lovely chain of movements, *en tournant*, for the ballerina. Away she



spins from her partner, circles round him, joins him again, momentarily, for a pirouette—and then off again on another enchanted and enchanting circle; the pirouettes end the sentences in the choreographic phrasing and a paragraph is marked by a profound arabesque. This is very Ashtonesque choreography in its submission of difficult steps to an effect not of virtuosity but of delicate poetry; it is typical, too, in its continuous, uninterrupted development. I may speak of its sentences and paragraphs, but the essence of it is that it never seems to stop and start again; it has the punctuation and unity of a poem, albeit of a rather short one encased in a deal of painstaking versification.

Ashton has, so far, attempted one other classical ballet in three acts. That one, *Sylvia*, was endowed with choreography by Mérante long ago when it was a new ballet at the Paris Opéra; but only the rather too eventful, mythological scenario and Delibes' superb ballet music remained. The choreography in the Royal Ballet's version is entirely Ashton's. Delibes' bountiful store of danceable melody, having been relegated to the 'palm tree' tea-rooms, has now very rightly returned to more fashionable favour; his score, at all events, is the first reason why *Sylvia* is a much better ballet than *Cinderella*. Though Ashton, here, might be a little uncomfortable with the quaint requirements of his inherited scenario, he was at least dealing with ballet music which was comparable with Tchaikowsky's best. *Sylvia*, as a consequence, has always seemed to be sprinkled with choreographic jewels. Yet its fortunes at Covent Garden have been slightly freakish; as executed, if not as composed, it had seemed to be 'curate's egg-like' rather than a complete success until, after the Bolshoi Company had come and gone, it was again revived—and then, suddenly, it 'clicked'. I have no doubt that this was not only because the Royal Ballet's familiarity with the work had at last grown to the point of

mastery, but because, too, the Bolshoi had been so challenging a stimulant. Be that as it may, *Sylvia* has become a treasure to be preserved along with *The Sleeping Beauty* and *Giselle*; and the role of Sylvia herself, which Fonteyn never danced other than well, has now become comparable with her Aurora. Indeed I know of nothing in the nineteenth-century classics or in the Ashton-Fonteyn repertory which excels the first Act of *Sylvia* from the moment when the huntress and her attendant nymphs enter (to what a gorgeous accompaniment of mock-heroic horns and trumpets) until their long dance together is over. Or rather there are two dances. The first is done with bow and arrow, helmet and cuirass, the bright, unlethal implements of Diana's devotees; and in the second the shining impedimenta are put aside, and Delibes, the choreographer and the nymphs relax (off-duty, as it were) from their pomp and circumstance to a lovely, unforced embroidery of choral tune and movement, with Sylvia now unobtrusively leading now gently supported by her attendants. Once again it is the unbroken continuity of Ashton's lyrical inventiveness which is the essence of the matter; and once again the beauty dwindles when Fonteyn is not Sylvia.

To my mind at least, Ashton's *Daphnis and Chloe* has been another slow starter and, to a considerable extent, an ultimate winner. But even now, when, with familiarity, the choreography's own personality and its sensitive adjustment to the far-from-easy score have made their mark, it is not, in my view, wholly satisfactory. It is not quite a stylistic unity and, even now, there are times when the dance seems no more than a painstaking servant to the music rather than its equal partner; it is in the cavortings of the pirates that style seems lacking and in the final jubilation of the music that the choreography (inevitably, perhaps) seems most servile. But there is one memorable passage in the final scene: Chloe's long dance of reunion with Daphnis in the course of which she springs

up in his arms, then falls again, in movements which are almost purely classical and yet exquisitely reflect and enhance the music's ebb and surge. The image evoked is of a fountain, cascading, drooping, cascading again; and how delicately true an evocation it is, how fastidious in its understatement! It is a matter not only of an Ashton's imagination but also of a Fonteyn's line and taste and timing.

Indeed, an evocative imagery is one of the recurrent and special charms of Ashton's choreography: the fountain of Daphnis and Chloe, the (almost) sleep-walking trance of Cinderella's spins and circles, the (almost) domesticated enjoyment of Sylvia and her nymphs as they dance together, the daisy chain towards the end of *Symphonic Variations*—these are choreographic episodes which, lovely in themselves, are made the lovelier by their hinting at images beyond the strict business of the movements. The language of such choreography is, like that of poetry, rich with implications which are not to be found in the dictionary or the manuals of dance.

I must mention one other example, which, when Fonteyn is the dancer, is, perhaps, the most effective of all. This occurs in *Tiresias*, the last and, alas, by no means the happiest of the many contributions which Constant Lambert made to the Royal Ballet's musical repertory. But, whatever may be said of the rest of it, the long dance (in the second Act) of the female Tiresias and her partner is beautiful. In this dance Tiresias, supported by her partner in exact profile to the audience, performs a series of high-stepping movements, each leg circling in turn, elaborately high and full, the toe just but only just touching the ground. The image here suggested—and it may sound prosaic enough—is of a high-stepping horse in one of those American trotting races; but it is like an artist's fantasy on that image—no champion horse ever trotted with quite such slow-motion elegance. Here, again, the movement, as designed by Ashton and

executed by Fonteyn, is pretty in itself but, because it is so quaintly, charmingly evocative, brings with it some extra visual astonishment, somehow poignant, somehow humorous. The choreography of all choreographers, you may say, contains similar metaphors and suggestions; that may be, but I know none who does the trick with quite Ashton's touch of casual, reticent, piquant poetry.

Five other post-war ballets by Ashton—largely, or at least partly, for Fonteyn—I shall mention only briefly. One of them, *Don Juan*, was a failure pure and simple, the only specimen of his post-war choreography for Fonteyn which has died unmourned; here, for once, he did not cope satisfactorily with his music (that of Strauss's tone-poem) and the ballet is chiefly remembered for its first-night disaster when Fonteyn so hurt her leg that she was incapacitated for many months.

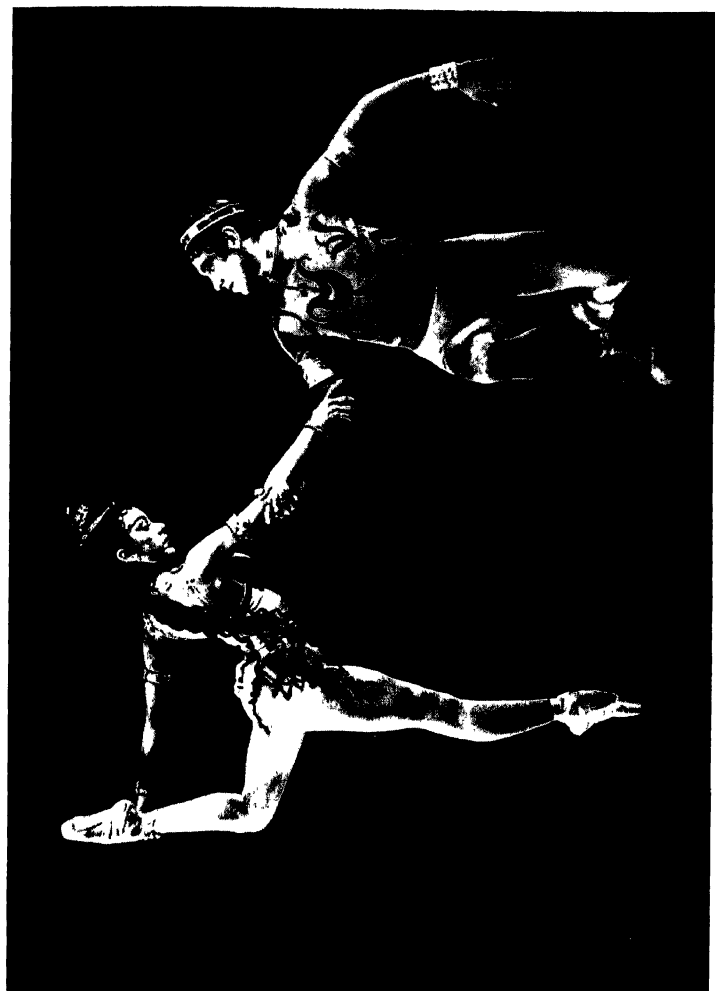
*Scènes de Ballet*, coming after *Symphonic Variations* in 1946, has always seemed a product both of the surplus energy engendered in making that masterpiece and of the choreographer's need for a change of mood. The style is the same neo-classicism but the poetry has been put aside for an elaborate technical exercise, dictated partly, no doubt, by Stravinsky's intricate, dry-as-dust score, but partly, too, by Ashton's need for just such an academic experiment as a relief and as a contrast. It is a heartless ballet and therefore no great one, but as an exercise it is imposingly, deftly exacting and has, in its time, been performed expertly by Fonteyn, radiantly, but less expertly, by Shearer, and, more recently, with great competence by Nerina. *La Péri*, a protracted pas de deux for Fonteyn and Michael Somes, was at first no unqualified success, but (apart from its sartorial prettiness, owed to a gifted pupil of Dior) it is memorable for an exhilarating sequence of lifts and arabesques and, in more recent performance, it has gained greatly in dramatic force. *Homage to the Queen*, Ashton's sustained choreographic fanfare for the

Coronation, showed a new assurance, an almost extravagant abundance of invention in his favourite (classical) idiom; this Coronation Ode among ballets may be a bit long and a bit ponderous with ermine and gold, as is the way with artists' tributes to Majesty, but it certainly has the virtuosity and the grandeur which belong to such an occasion. (It is worth reflecting how puny, relatively, a Coronation ballet by our national company would have been fifteen years before.)

*Birthday Offering* is another ballet made for an occasion—that of the company's twenty-fifth birthday. If I find it unnecessary here to dwell on it, that is only because it would be a redundant illustration of my theme and not because it has been, in any sense, a failure. It could be considered, perhaps, as a more intimate and more specific companion-piece to *Homage to the Queen*—an attempt to show off the standard of classical proficiency which the company, after only twenty-five years of life, had attained. It asked and got (and gets) a high standard of performance from its seven ballerinas, including Fonteyn, and their partners. But its special quality is not so much in this general proficiency of technical prowess as in the deft percipience with which the particular personality of each ballerina is suited by the variation allotted to her. *Birthday Offering* may be no big ballet, but it is, in its way, well-nigh perfect—a bright medal to be worn by the company along with that larger, more important and more unusual medal which is *Symphonic Variations*.

So to *Symphonic Variations* I return. The first wonder of it is in its musical sense, its matching of almost strictly classical movement to a self-sufficient score in a way which never suggests a mere step-for-note obedience but makes the movement seem a true partner, a 'thing in itself', fulfilling the music and not drowned in it. The particular points of relevance in César Franck's score are perhaps these: it is written as a piano concerto, but as one in which the soloist, the virtuoso

(the piano part, in other words) is integrated in the orchestra; though its composer described it as 'Variations Symphoniques', the six variations are in fact a relatively humble item in the total composition, occurring between the long and thematically distinct introduction and the much longer and (thematically) equally separate epilogue; it is, moreover, one continuous composition and, finally, it is (to paraphrase Tovey) a supreme example of Franck's 'extempore manner'—a manner which suggests not so much a complete improvisation as the ruminative development of strongly held ideas. Ashton has coped with this bundle of problems, in the first place, by choosing a cast of six dancers (to match the tally of variations), their roles being of almost equal prominence; he has coped with the piano part not by allotting it to any one dancer—a method which, even for such a free fantasia, might have seemed more strictly correct though it would almost certainly have resulted in a strained lop-sidedness of choreography—but by distributing it among the sextet, much as Franck himself has allowed no consistent dominance to the piano but has parcelled out the leading role between piano and orchestra. And Ashton, in his own way, has wonderfully reflected Franck's ruminative, extempore manner. It is as though his treatment of the successive problems raised by the music were entirely empirical. He has relied on a uniformity of choreographic style and mood—a kind of unobtrusive, reflective classicism, difficult, indeed, to execute but essentially quiet, almost muted in its total effect; and he has relied—how very much he would be the first to admit—on Sophie Fedorovitch's gently abstract backcloth and Hellenic costumes to underline the same chosen atmosphere. It is as though, given these things and Fonteyn as basic prerequisites, he has trusted his subtle instinct to answer each musical conundrum as it comes along, not trying to impose any predetermined choreographic shape, but simply being guided by the composer from



**'TIRESIAS' WITH JOHN FIELD**

Variation on a classical theme

*Photograph by Roger Wood*



CURTAIN-CALL FOR AURORA

*Photograph by Roger Wood*



introduction through variations to epilogue as to the best disposition of his sextet and as to the most appropriate shape of movement and posture. Like the composer and yet in no apparent servitude to him, he, too, has achieved a persistent, ruminative unity, an uninterrupted development of pattern and movement. It is, again, this flow of his inventiveness which is most astonishing—and most of all in the long sequence leading to the epilogue, when a simple-seeming and utterly apposite daisy-chain of dancers is formed, broken and formed again to the pianist's continuous stream of gentle arpeggios.

#### INTERNATIONAL COMPARISONS

Three complete successes, if *Sylvia* be included, a little hazardingly, among them, and many other ballets in which his special quality has shone at least fitfully: that is the record of Ashton's works for Fonteyn in the post-war years. It is no bad record. On it is based my contention that he has given to British choreography a national style of which she has been the exemplary interpreter. He, if you like, has made the road; she has led the way along it. To his claim must, of course, be added the surviving work of two from earlier years, *Les Patineurs*, for instance, and *Façade*, which, playfully or seriously, obviously or faintly, have pointed in the same direction, also those fine works—*Madame Chrysanthème*, *Rinaldo* and *Armida*—which he has made recently but not for Fonteyn. To her record must, especially, be added the classics both of the nineteenth century and, more recent gems in her coronet, of Fokine; these, so to speak, have given her the certificate of leadership among her colleagues. But the heart of the neo-classical matter has been in her work with Ashton.

It may seem, from a glance back at the post-war Ashton

ballets mentioned by me, that, in some cases, I have stretched the meaning of neo-classicism a bit far. No one, I think, would dispute the correctness of the label for, say, *Symphonic Variations*, *Scènes de Ballet* or *Birthday Offering* (unless it were argued, wrongly in my view, that *Birthday Offering* was not so much neo-classical as pastiche). But *Daphnis and Chloe*, *Tiresias*, even *La Péri*, in all of which there is, quite rightly, a marriage or at least an attempted marriage of styles—can these really be described as neo-classical? The work of artists—of choreographers along with the rest—cannot quite be labelled like luggage, even when it is the artists themselves who have written the label and fixed it. Fokine's theory insists on the importance of suiting style to subject; Ashton, for whose Western generation Fokine's innovations have become commonplace, is concerned to give the maximum expressiveness to the purely classical idiom and, accordingly, to treat his chosen subjects in a more or less classical manner. Ashton and Fokine, therefore, seem to approach the business of ballet-making from almost opposite ends. But, midway between them, there is a large meeting ground common to both; *The Firebird*, for instance, is there, also *Les Sylphides*, *Carnaval* and, on Ashton's side, *Tiresias* and *Daphnis and Chloe* (both choreographers, be it remembered, have dealt with Ravel's music for Longus' story). Let the labels, therefore, be taken—if labels can be so taken—with a pinch of salt. All the same, the beautiful passages in *Tiresias* and *Daphnis* (the two examples on which I concentrate, because they are the hardest for my argument to digest) are precisely those where Ashton does fuse the chosen style, the Minoan angularities of *Tiresias*, the later Hellenic attitudes of *Daphnis*, with an evidently classical idiom. The tendency is always there and, when the big moment comes, that is how he does justice to it.

If it is difficult to put precise labels on choreographers'

luggage, it is just as difficult, and probably more dangerous, to say which labels are best in the sense of being the most enviable, the most likely to take the choreographer on a prosperous journey. Difficult to do so among individual choreographers, still more difficult among the ballets and ballet companies of the various countries. In ballet as in other things, best for one country may not be so good for another. All the same, the risk should be taken; the international comparisons (of companies if not of particular dancers) are necessary and should be made.

In the ballet (or, what is more precisely relevant, the choreographic impulse) of the United States, France and Denmark there are certainly points to be envied by our national company. The American style or styles, as exemplified in the work of the brilliant Jerome Robbins and the studiously talented Agnes de Mille, is capable, as the British style is not, of a steely brilliance in classical virtuosity; it is rich, as British ballet is not, in folklore, and Robbins' *Fancy Free* is only a particularly fine specimen of what occurs with enviable frequency in American choreography—an assimilation of modern popular dance (jazz, in other words) to ballet's requirements. French ballet may, with all respect to Petit and Charrat, owe more to décor and costume than to choreography; even so, there is a chic sensuality about it which is certainly right for France and internationally effective—and how often we have wished that the French taste in décor did not get lost in the Channel crossing! Besides, the ballet at the Paris Opéra is, by a long way, the senior among national organisations. Length of tradition, if it is very long, can be a danger as well as an advantage, and some thirty years ago the Opéra ballet was certainly showing few signs of liveliness. That has changed now. Thanks largely to the efforts and the panache of Serge Lifar, the French National Ballet has considerably revived; its pro-

ductions and its solutions to common problems of organisation neither are nor should be overlooked by the makers of our young ballet. The Danes, too, have a long, unbroken tradition; what is most exceptional and most enviable is that this tradition, as represented by the Royal Company in Copenhagen and dating back to Bournonville and beyond, into the eighteenth century, has retained both vigour and highly national character. The Danish classics and the Danish versions of the international classics are both admirable and intact.

Yet, when the total balance is struck with America, France and Denmark, there is, I think, reason for British satisfaction. The long unbroken Danish tradition is enviable but the Danes (at least without Harald Lander) have little new to show—they need guests, such as Ashton, to give distinction to their modern repertory. Parisian modishness and Petit's sense of theatre may put a smart and tantalising face on French ballet (or some of it), but French choreography nowadays is often amateurish, and lapses all too readily into the easy sexiness of the Montmartre night-clubs; the French National Ballet, as distinct from French ballet in general, may also instruct the British, valuably, in points of *décor* and production as well as in organisation, but, in the essential matters of choreography and dancing, it is, for all its renewed and welcome animation, to be respected rather than emulated. American ballet, vigorous, inventive, abundant with choreographic and dancing talent, is, at the same time, rootless in organisation; if it is rich in its own folksy tradition, its hold on the classical tradition is distinctly frail; and there is loss as well as gain in its closeness to modern, popular dance idioms—sometimes the jazz may be raised up to ballet but sometimes, too, the ballet may be pulled down to the level of the ordinary Hollywood musical. American or even French and Danish details may be enviable, but our national ballet's solid

organisation, firm hold on the classics, talented performers and, especially, the dominant tendency of its modern choreography and the artistry of its prima ballerina are reason enough for pride—though not, be it hoped, for smugness.

#### THE COMPARISON WITH THE BOLSHOI

But, of course, the only national ballet which, in point of size, scope and importance, really vies with our own nowadays is that of Soviet Russia. The interesting comparison is with the Bolshoi Company, not with the companies of Paris, Copenhagen or even New York. And if here I revive the embers of that controversy which blazed, merrily enough, when the Bolshoi Company came to London, I confess to being happy to do so.

Best for one country may not be so good for another. Let it be taken for granted that the modern style of Soviet choreography is right (I am not prepared to say it is 'best') for the Soviet Union. Let it also be taken for granted that Soviet ballet is copiously blessed (much more so than the enviable American ballet) with a living tradition of folk-dancing and that in certain obvious details—the production of crowd scenes, the close attention to mimed effects, the sensational value of big jumps—there is a lot which our ballet can learn from its choreography. But, if the matter is considered in less detail but also less superficially, what is to be learnt from a comparison between the Soviet choreography and our own? My answer to that will, to a large extent, be predictable from what I said earlier about dramatic ballets or silent dramas. Soviet choreography is, of course, the very tabernacle of silent drama and, however readily it be granted that such ballet may be right for the relatively backward audiences of the Soviet Union, it would certainly not be right—as the repertory's main modern supplement to the

classics—for Covent Garden. More than that, it is (in absolute terms and, if my temerity will be forgiven, irrespective of the audience) an essential misuse of the art of ballet, whereas the Royal Ballet's neo-classicism, as devised by Ashton and supremely executed by Fonteyn, is a correct use and, perhaps, the most correct of all possible uses at this moment of ballet's history.

These are big statements. By way, not of palliation but of explanation, I would recall the polite indignation expressed by Lavrovsky (the choreographer of the Bolshoi's *Romeo and Juliet*) when he heard it said that Soviet choreographers seemed unaware even of Fokine and, by so much the more, of developments subsequent to Fokine in Western choreography. He and his colleagues, Lavrovsky said, had closely studied Fokine's ballets (or some of the most famous) and had learnt much from them. Of course, in an Anglo-Soviet discussion about choreography, as about much besides, misunderstandings abound. When, for instance, Ulanova, in London, said contemptuously that '*avant-garde*' ballet, which still seemed to be the darling of the West, had been tried and discarded in the Soviet Union more than thirty years ago, she was speaking out of a considerable ignorance of what, under Diaghileff and after him, had really happened in Western choreography. So, too, there were misunderstandings both in Lavrovsky's protest and in the comments which had caused it. Perhaps Soviet choreographers have studied Fokine. And it would not be hard to see that *Romeo and Juliet* (for instance) or *The Fountain of Bakhchisarai* might be regarded by them as not very distant relations of *Schéhérazade* or *Thamar* or *The Polovtsian Dances*. But even if such were their claim, it would still, I think, be ill-founded: Fokine was, indeed, the inventor of, among other things, modern dramatic ballet, but the essence of his creed was that style should suit subject; Soviet silent dramas may therefore derive, rather loosely, from what

he taught and practised, but where they differ is precisely in the suiting of style to subject. In the first place, realism and stylistic suitability are not one and the same thing, and it is realism which is the primary Soviet target, and, in the second, whenever a 'big' moment comes (like the several *pas de deux* for *Romeo and Juliet*) they return to their own form of classicism—sensational, no doubt, but essentially uninventive and stereotyped. (This, I should add, is something quite unlike the inventive, adaptable neo-classicism of the important dances in Ashton's character or narrative ballets.)

I have, however, digressed from my main line. Every choreographer, even the greatest, is of his time. Fokine's highly successful efforts to demolish the rigid edifice of traditional, nineteenth-century choreography was, in its time, essential; and, in so far as anything can be called permanent in this fluid art-form, it has permanently enriched ballet. But revolutions, born as they are of a revolt against excess, produce their own excesses. With the passing of the Diaghilevian and later decades, we have come to realise that the ballets which endure are neither the more dramatic adventures of Fokine and those who have followed this line of his development (no matter how well they may have suited style to subject) nor the chic, up-to-the-minute extravagances of Diaghileff's later seasons, but either those traditional works of the nineteenth century against which (or, at least, against whose stiffer conventions) Fokine rebelled or the subsequent works, by Fokine himself, by Massine, by Balanchine, by some few others and by Ashton, which have at least one vital and conspicuous point in common with the once scorned products of the nineteenth-century Maryinsky. The point in common is simply that they are all ballets of dance as distinct from drama.

Now, it is of course true that (except in the Soviet Union) only the best of the nineteenth-century classics have survived;

and it seems certain enough that a reason, perhaps the chief reason, why others besides *The Sleeping Beauty*, *Swan Lake* and the remainder of the familiar few have not survived is because their dance was so submerged in traditional mime—in fact, in conventionalised drama. Fokine could rightly claim to have changed all that and the Soviet Russians could claim to have been, in this respect, his followers. But, however successful Fokine may have been (as he certainly was) in suiting style to theme, he could not claim to have given longevity to those ballets of his in which the theme was primarily dramatic. The Soviet Russians insist on what they regard as ballet's wider dramatic possibilities as opposed to the constrictions of more or less purely dance-ballets; but I would not care to bet that Lavrovsky's *Romeo and Juliet* (to take what is perhaps the best of its Soviet kind) would outstay *Schéhérazade*, much less those essentially 'dance-ballets', *Les Sylphides* and *The Firebird*.

A ballet must dance if it is to survive. But there is more to it than that. Ballet, when all is said and done, is founded on faith in a particular and particularly exacting kind of dance. If it is, to say the least, a justified faith, that is not only because the ballet-trained dancer is exceptionally adaptable to other kinds of theatrical dance (to one who has graduated in the hardest school, other lessons come more easily), but also because classical ballet, in an unadulterated or only slightly adulterated form, is capable of such extraordinary and, perhaps, peerless beauty. If, then, the reason why such ballets as *Swan Lake* have endured—have, in fact, become classics—is the beauty of their strictly classical dance, it is almost equally true that most of the subsequent ballets which have survived, or deserve to survive, or would have survived but for some accident of fortune, are those which not only dance but do so in a manner close or even very close to the traditional nineteenth-century manner. Consider a random selection:



*Les Sylphides*, the most delicate of Fokine's variations on classicism; *The Firebird*, of which the essentially classical (albeit Fokinesque) dancing of the Firebird herself is the chief choreographic adornment; *Symphonic Variations* (if only an adequate successor to Fonteyn should eventually appear); and, in part but not in whole, the Royal Ballet's *Sylvia*. To this very short list I would add Balanchine's *Cotillon* (lost in the wreckage of the de Basil Company but radiantly worthy of revival), Balanchine's *Serenade* (which belongs to the New York City Ballet and, more or less, to the same period as *Cotillon*) and, as a light-hearted coda, Massine's *Beau Danube*. Of course, any such list—both for its inclusions and its exclusions—is bound to seem reprehensibly personal. There are many other ballets or bits of ballets which other selectors—and, of course, I as well—would believe worthy to survive. But it is at least my firm conviction that those which are in fact the most likely to do so are ballets which have kept close, even conspicuously close, to the classical tradition.

But there is, I think, still more to it. It will, perhaps, have been noticeable that my (very tentative) list included two neo-classical works by Balanchine of, roughly, the years 1932–1937, but none of his later essays in the same idiom which make up so large a part of the repertory of the New York City Ballet. The reason for these particular inclusions and exclusions is, I suggest, relevant. When Balanchine devised *Cotillon* and *Serenade*, he made ballets which, besides being closely classical in idiom, had a distinctive air about them (a quality of personal poetry, if you like). His later essays in an even stricter classicism are no more than academic exercises—brilliant in their virtuosity, no doubt, but essentially lifeless. So, again, I exclude from my list not only the complete *Romeo and Juliet* and *Bakhchisarai* (the only modern Soviet ballets of which I have seen the full versions) but even those parts of these two ballets in which drama gives way to more

or less classical virtuosity; these dances, for all their intermittent sensationalism, are essentially such a feeble reproduction of traditional models. In their lifelessness, though, indeed, in little else, they are like the later samples of Balanchine's neo-classicism.

In other words, it is not enough that a ballet should dance if it is to survive. Its chances of survival are much greater if it keeps at least fairly close to the classical idiom. But, in doing so, it must at the same time be more than an academic thesis or a copy of the Old Masters; it must have a soul of its own.

#### LOOKING AHEAD

Every choreographer is of his time. This point having been stressed with reference to Fokine, it would be absurd to overlook its relevance to Ashton. There is, of course, a danger that the neo-classical choreography which, as provided by him and chiefly demonstrated by Fonteyn, has become basic to the Royal Ballet, may, in time, and with less proficient ballet-makers and a less gifted ballerina, develop hardened arteries of its own. The danger certainly exists. But there is, I think, a saving difference between the nineteen-fifties and the beginning of the century. In these fifty years or so ballet has been shaken up as, surely, never before; no previous half-century—certainly not the Maryinsky period preceding the revolution of Diaghileff and Fokine—contained such variations, fluctuations, developments and counter-developments in the art, not least in the choreographic art, of ballet. I dare to think that in this century we have already had a singular opportunity to find out what really is enduring in ballet, what is its essence and what are its excrescences. With the modern internationalisation of ballet, the opportunity continues. The difference, for instance, between the academic exercises of Balanchine and the heartfelt choreographic poetry

of Ashton is a lesson writ wide and plain. Thus I think the Royal Ballet is, or should be, doubly forewarned; it should be able to see to the heart of the subject in a way which was not possible before and, by the many and various international expressions of ballet around, it should be protected, as no previous national ballet, against ivory-towered inflexibility.

But nothing stands still. The Royal Ballet—let us be deeply thankful for it—still has much to learn, not least from the Americans and most of all from the Soviet Russians. Other ballerinas must begin to take over from Fonteyn, and if there is at present no completely equipped heiress apparent (that would be asking much), then at least there is the very distinctive star-quality of the young Beriosova and there is a healthy abundance of other growing talent. Other choreographers, too, must begin to take over from Ashton. There are hopeful signs that Kenneth Macmillan may, in his necessarily and desirably different manner, pursue an essentially neo-classical course. About John Cranko the signs at present are less good—not because his first attempt at a full-length classical ballet was, on the whole, a failure (it was, on the whole, good that he should have made the attempt at all), but because his choreography, which began with such sensitive promise at Sadler's Wells, has been so readily attracted by the slick smartness of the little revue; *The Shadow*, however, is a small beauty (when danced by Beriosova) and the high possibilities are still there. The example of Ashton is formidably there as well, in the considerable (and still growing) legacy of his ballets and especially in those ballets which he has made for Margot Fonteyn.

But nothing stands still. Those of us who were fortunate enough to see the Bolshoi Company in London have been able to recapture the magic, or much of the magic, of

Ulanova's *Giselle* because of the remarkable film which, at Covent Garden and on a single night, Paul Czinner made of this, the most memorable of our visitors' programmes. Here at least is a ballet's performance preserved against time. Is it too much to hope that what was done for the Bolshoi may also be done for our own Royal Ballet? If it is done, then, since I must be allowed to choose the matter for the film, the programme will be made up of a dance from *Tiresias* (this in homage, not least, to Constant Lambert), a dance from *Daphnis and Chloe*, the first scenes of both *Sylvia* and *The Firebird*, the second Act of *The Sleeping Beauty* and every moment of *Symphonic Variations*. So the record which I, beneficent in my egoism, would preserve of Britain's young Royal Company of the nineteen-fifties, for the ballet lovers of fifty years hence, would be a record of Margot Fonteyn; and out of the six chosen ballets four would be by the choreographer who, with her, has raised 'Madame's' brave, far-sighted organisation to the artistry which we, the fortunate, have observed.

## APPENDIX

- 18th May 1919 Peggy Hookham is born at Reigate, in Surrey, England, of an English father and an Anglo-Brazilian mother. (She has one brother, Felix Fonteyn, a photographer by profession.)
- 1923 Her family moves to Ealing, where she studies under Grace Bosutow and remains in her School of Dancing until 1927.
- 1927 Her father, the Assistant Engineer of the China Organisation of the British-American Tobacco Company, takes the family to China via the United States of America. She attends school for a short time in Louisville, Kentucky. In China the family lives, in turn, in Tientsin, Hong-Kong and Shanghai. She takes dancing lessons from various teachers.
- 1931 She returns to England with her mother for a holiday, and sees *Job* and *Faade* in a programme sponsored by the newly-formed Camargo Society. She visits the Sadler's Wells Ballet at the 'Old Vic' and sees, for the first time, Lopokova, Markova and Dolin. She attends classes by Nicholas Legat.
- In Shanghai she studies for two years with George Goncharov, a former pupil of the State School of Ballet in Leningrad.
- 1933 On return to England she studies under Astafieva, a former teacher of Markova and Dolin.

1934

In March she attends her first class at the Sadler's Wells Ballet school under Ninette de Valois' direction and makes her first appearance in the Sadler's Wells Ballet as a Snowflake in *Casse-Noisette*.

During the Summer International Opera Season at Covent Garden she is in the corps de ballet provided by the Sadler's Wells Company.

Her first solo role—on the opening night of the Sadler's Wells Season—is Young Tregennis in *The Haunted Ballroom* (choreography by Ninette de Valois, music by Geoffrey Towe); this is followed by the Mazurka in *Les Sylphides*. Other parts danced by her during the 1934-35 season are: a cygnet in *Swan Lake*; Lolly Willowses in *The Lord of Burleigh* (choreography by Frederick Ashton, music by Mendelssohn). Her first important role is 'the young Creole girl' in Frederick Ashton's *Rio Grande* (music by Constant Lambert).

1935

She dances the leading role in *Les Rendez-vous* (choreography by Ashton, music by Auber/Lambert) and the role of Alicia in *The Haunted Ballroom*.

After the announcement of Markova's imminent retirement from the Sadler's Wells Ballet, Margot Fonteyn writes to a friend: 'Isn't it terrible about Markova leaving? I cannot think what will happen next season without her; we shall all have to work very hard, but even hard work can't make a *prima ballerina* if there isn't one'.

8th October

She dances the Polka in *Façade* (choreography by Ashton, music by William Walton). Later she dances the Tango in the same ballet.

## APPENDIX

- 26th November She dances the role of the young bride in *Le Baiser de la Fée*, created for her by Frederick Ashton (music by Stravinsky).
- 16th December For the first time she dances Odette in *Swan Lake*, partnered by Robert Helpmann; the role of Odile is danced by Ruth French.
- 1936
- 10th March She creates the role of 'the woman in the ball dress' in *Apparitions* (choreography by Frederick Ashton, music by Liszt/Lambert).
- 10th November She dances 'the flower girl' in *Nocturne* (choreography by Frederick Ashton, music by Delius).  
During this season she dances, for the first time, the Sugar Plum Fairy in *Casse-Noisette*.
- 1937
- 19th January She dances, for the first time, the title-role of *Giselle*, partnered by Robert Helpmann.
- 16th February She dances the pas de deux with Robert Helpmann in *Les Patineurs* (choreography by Ashton, music by Meyerbeer).
- 27th April She dances the role of Julia in *A Wedding Bouquet* (choreography by Frederick Ashton, scenario by Gertrude Stein, music by Lord Berners).  
During the year she takes over the role of Columbine in *Carnaval* (music by Schumann).  
In May she dances with the Company for the first time outside the United Kingdom. At the Paris Exhibition the Company performs in the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées; she alternates with Pearl Argyle in the revival of *Pomona* (choreography by Ashton, music by Lambert).
- 1938
- 27th January She appears at Sadler's Wells in *Horoscope* (choreography by Ashton, music by Lambert).

# FONTEYN

15th November She takes, for the first time, the double role of Odette-Odile in *Swan Lake* at Sadler's Wells.

She takes over from Pearl Argyle the role of Venus in *The Judgement of Paris* (choreography by Ashton, music by Lennox Berkeley).

1939

2nd February *The Sleeping Beauty* is revived at Sadler's Wells (décor by Nadia Benois). This is a Gala Performance, in aid of the Housing Centre, in the presence of Queen Mary. She dances Aurora.

22nd March She dances Aurora at Covent Garden in the Command Performance of *The Sleeping Beauty* in honour of the President of the French Republic.

At the outbreak of war the Company goes on tour. At Christmas they return to Sadler's Wells.

1940

23rd January She creates the role of one of the leaders of the Children of Light in *Dante Sonata* (choreography by Ashton, music by Liszt).

24th April She creates the role of the Bride in *The Wise Virgins* (choreography by Ashton, music by Bach).

May During the first week of May she visits Holland with the Company. After four performances they return to England, the German invasion having begun. Scenery and costumes are left behind. (Much of it has been recovered since the war.)

Sadler's Wells is taken over as a Rest Centre for homeless people during the air attacks on London. The Ballet Company, for the rest of the war, alternates between seasons at the New Theatre and provincial tours, including visits to various garrison camps. At first two pianos serve as accompaniment, later an orchestra.



## APPENDIX

- 1941  
27th January She creates the role of Success in *The Wanderer* (music by Schubert). This ballet is devised by Frederick Ashton in two weeks during the company's visit to Totnes. It opens a month's season at the New Theatre in London; after a tour the Company returns to the New Theatre.
- 28th May She creates the role of Love in *Orpheus and Eurydice* (choreography by Ninette de Valois, music by Gluck).
- 1942  
14th January She creates the role of the Lady in *Comus* (Robert Helpmann's first ballet, music by Purcell/Lambert).
- 19th May She dances Ophelia in Helpmann's next ballet, *Hamlet* (music by Tchaikowsky).
- 4th December She takes the role of 'the betrayed girl' in *The Rake's Progress* (choreography by Ninette de Valois, derived from Hogarth, music by Gavin Gordon).
- 1943  
23rd January She dances Swanilda in *Coppélia*.  
7th April She creates the part of Una in *The Quest* (choreography by Frederick Ashton, based on Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, music by Walton).
- 1944  
1st February She dances in *Le Spectre de la Rose* (pas de deux originally devised by Fokine for Karsavina and Nijinsky).
- 10th October She dances Columbine in *Carnaval* (Schumann-Fokine).
- 1945 During this year she tours with E.N.S.A. and visits, among other places, Paris and Brussels. Seasons follow at the Princes Theatre and New Theatre in London.

# PONTEYN

1946

20th February

At the reopening of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, she dances Aurora in *The Sleeping Beauty*. This is an entirely new production, décor and costumes by Oliver Messel. The performance is attended by King George VI, Queen Elizabeth and other members of the Royal Family.

18th March

She dances in *Nocturne* at Covent Garden.

24th April

She creates one of the three roles for ballerinas in *Symphonic Variations* (choreography by Frederick Ashton, music by César Franck, décor by Sophie Fedorovitch).

7th June

She appears on Television at the reopening of Alexandra Palace after the war.

12th June

She dances in *Giselle* (its first performance at Covent Garden).

During the summer she tours the provinces and the Continent; ten days in Vienna.

25th October

She appears in a new production of *Coppélia*.

12th November

She dances La Bolero in *Les Sirènes* (choreography by Ashton, music by Lord Berners).

12th December

She dances the role of the Spirit of the Air in *The Fairy Queen* (choreography by Ashton, music by Purcell).

19th December

She dances the role of Odette-Odile in a revised version of *Swan Lake*, at Covent Garden.

1947

6th February

She dances the part of the Miller's Wife in a revival of the *Three-Cornered Hat* (choreography by Massine, music by de Falla). Massine dances 'the miller'.

August/September

She spends two weeks at the Edinburgh Festival, followed by a tour of the Continent (Brussels, Prague, Warsaw, Poznań, Malmö and Oslo).

## APPENDIX

- 2nd October *Little Ballerina*, a film in which she takes part, is trade-shown.
- 26th November She takes the title-role of *Mam'zelle Angot* (choreography by Massine, music by Lecocq/Gordon Jacob).
- 1948
- 11th February She appears at Covent Garden in *Scènes de Ballet* (choreography by Ashton, music by Stravinsky).
- March She goes on tour with the Company to Holland (Amsterdam, The Hague and Rotterdam).
- 22nd May She dances the role of Agathe, the cat woman, in *Les Demoiselles de la Nuit* (choreography by Roland Petit, music by Françaix), at the Théâtre Marigny in Paris, where she appears as guest artist with the Roland Petit Company.
- September Two weeks at the Edinburgh Festival, followed by a tour of Paris, Düsseldorf and Hamburg.  
She dances the part of La Morte Amoureuse in the first performance of *Don Juan* (choreography by Ashton, music by Strauss). During the performance she strains a knee ligament and has to rest for three months.
- 1949
- 25th February Her first appearance at Covent Garden after her injury is in *Cinderella* (choreography by Frederick Ashton, music by Prokofieff). Moira Shearer takes her place on the first night on 23rd December, 1948.
- 10th May She appears on Television with Michael Somes and Harold Turner in excerpts from Ashton's ballets no longer in the Sadler's Wells repertory.
- May At the Florence Festival she dances with the Company in the Teatro Comunale.  
She appears with Robert Helpmann at a Gala

# FONTEYN

Performance in Copenhagen in the presence of of the King of Denmark.

9th October

The Sadler's Wells Ballet's first visit to the United States of America. She dances Aurora on the first night at the Metropolitan Opera House, New York. The New York Season lasts four weeks and is followed by a tour of Washington (D.C.), Richmond, Philadelphia, Chicago, East Lansing and the Canadian Cities of Toronto, Ottawa and Montreal.

November

The 31st Annual Convention of the National Association of Amusement Parks, Pools and Beaches in the U.S.A. awards Margot Fonteyn the right to ride free through any American Amusement Park's Tunnel of Love for the rest of her life.

11th December

The American tour ends.

1950

30th and

31st January

She dances with Robert Helpmann at two charity matinees in Oslo, in aid of the newly formed Norwegian Ballet. The first of these is attended by the King of Norway.

20th February

She dances the dual role of the Lady Dulcinea and Aldonza Lorenzo in *Don Quixote* (choreography by Ninette de Valois, music by Roberto Gerhard). She is partnered by Robert Helpmann.

9th March

At Covent Garden she dances *Symphonic Variations* and Princess Aurora in Act III of *The Sleeping Beauty*, at a Gala Performance in honour of the French President in the presence of King George VI, Queen Elizabeth and Princess Elizabeth.

5th April

She dances in the Company's first performance of *Ballet Imperial* (choreography by Balanchine to Tchaikowsky's Second Piano Concerto).

## APPENDIX

- 24th April She appears at La Scala in Milan in *The Sleeping Beauty*, partnered by Robert Helpmann.
- 15th May On the 21st Anniversary of the Sadler's Wells Ballet Company a Gala Performance is given at the Sadler's Wells Theatre, in the presence of Princess Margaret. Margot Fonteyn dances Young Tregennis in *The Haunted Ballroom*. (After the event it is realised that this was in fact only the 20th anniversary.)
- 2nd June She starts a series of provincial tours with a group of dancers from the Sadler's Wells Company; she dances, among other roles, the leading one in *L'Ile des Sirènes* (choreography by Alfred Rodrigues, music by Debussy).
- 5th September She leaves with the Company for the second American Tour, which lasts five months.
- 1951
- 5th April She dances Chloe in *Daphnis and Chloe* (originally commissioned from Ravel by Diaghileff and first performed in 1912, with choreography by Fokine). The new version is by Ashton. Michael Somes is Daphnis.
- 7th June She receives the C.B.E. in the Birthday Honours List.
- 9th July *Tiresias* (choreography by Frederick Ashton, music by Constant Lambert) is commissioned by the Arts Council for the Festival of Britain, and first performed at a Gala Performance at Covent Garden. The Queen and Princess Elizabeth are present. It is subsequently shown at the Edinburgh Festival. She dances the female Tiresias.
- 1952
- 3rd September Frederick Ashton's second full-length ballet

# FONTEYN

*Sylvia* (music by Delibes) is performed at Covent Garden. She dances *Sylvia*, partnered by Michael Somes.

*Autumn*

She visits Lisbon and Oporto with the Company, also the Berlin Festival. After her return she starts a provincial tour, during which she contracts diphtheria at Southampton and cannot dance for five months.

1953

18th March

Her first appearance, after her illness, is in *Apparitions*. The reception is tremendous. She makes a 'curtain' speech, which she rarely does.

2nd June

Covent Garden celebrates the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II with a ballet *Homage to the Queen* (choreography by Frederick Ashton, music by Malcolm Arnold, décor by Oliver Messel). She dances the Queen of the Air.

September

She dances with Michael Somes at the Granada Festival.

She accompanies the Company on its third American tour, which lasts over five months.

1954

June

She dances at the Holland Festival and, for the second time, at the Granada Festival.

She appears on Television with Michael Somes.

16th July

She succeeds Dame Adeline Genée as the President of the Royal Academy of Dancing.

She appears as guest artist with the Yugoslav National Ballet in Belgrade.

23rd August

She dances *The Firebird* (choreography by Fokine, music by Stravinsky) at the Empire Theatre in Edinburgh. This is part of the homage paid to Diaghileff, twenty-five years after his death. The rehearsals are conducted by Serge Grigorieff and Lubov Tchernicheva;

## APPENDIX

Tamara Karsavina, who had created the role of the Firebird in 1910, teaches it to Margot Fonteyn. Ernest Ansermet conducts the ballet at Edinburgh and also at the first night in London on August 31. Natalia Gontcharova's designs for the décor and costumes are used for this revival. Margot Fonteyn is partnered by Michael Somes.

1955

6th February

She marries Dr. Roberto de Arias in Paris at the Panamanian Consulate. (Before her marriage she announces that she plans to continue dancing 'for ever'.)

April

She dances for the first time in Helsinki and Stockholm.

September

She goes with the Company on its fourth transatlantic tour, which lasts three months.

Christmas

She accompanies her husband for a short visit to Panama. On New Year's Eve she dances in *Daphnis and Chloe* at Covent Garden.

She is guest artist with Michael Somes at La Scala, Milan. They dance in *The Firebird*.

1956

2nd January

'My dancing Mistress had told me that I must always be seen and never heard.'—Margot Fonteyn in a curtain-speech at Covent Garden after the announcement of her D.B.E. in the New Year's Honours.

6th January

Gala Performance to commemorate the reopening of the Sadler's Wells Theatre.

15th January

Dame Margot and Michael Somes dance with the Festival Ballet at a Gala Performance at the Casino in Monte Carlo, in the presence of Sir Winston Churchill.

She appears as guest artist with the Norwegian

# FONTEYN

Ballet Company during the winter season in Oslo. She is partnered by Michael Somes.

Pietro Annigoni paints her portrait in Panamanian national costume; it hangs in the dining-room of the Panamanian Embassy.

7th February She is invested with the insignia of Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire by the Queen Mother.

15th February She dances at the first night of *La Péri* (choreography by Ashton, music by Paul Dukas).

19th February The Sadler's Wells Ballet appears on Television, to mark the 10th Anniversary of the reopening of the Royal Opera House after the war. She dances in *Aurora's Wedding*, partnered by Michael Somes.

22nd March Gala Performance in Aid of the Sadler's Wells Benevolent Fund. She dances the solo 'Entrée de Madame Butterfly' (choreography by Frederick Ashton, music by Sullivan/Irving; Fonteyn's costumes by Dior), which previously she had danced only at the Granada Festival.

12th April She appears as guest artist with the Finnish National Ballet in Helsinki. She dances with Michael Somes in *Swan Lake*.

15th April In Helsinki she dances in *The Sleeping Beauty*.

18th April On the occasion of the marriage of Prince Rainier and Grace Kelly in Monte Carlo, the Festival Ballet dances Act 2 of *Swan Lake*. Dame Margot and Michael Somes are guest artists.

5th May The 25th anniversary of the Sadler's Wells Ballet Company is celebrated. She dances at Covent Garden with Robert Helpmann in *Façade*, also in Frederick Ashton's new ballet *Birthday Offering* (music by Glazunov).

At the 188th Royal Academy Summer Ex-



## APPENDIX

- hibition a bronze statue of her by Maurice Lambert, R.A., is on view. This is now at the Royal Ballet School, White Lodge, Richmond Park (lent by the Royal Academy).
- 20th October In the presence of an audience of 6000, she dances on a raft moored on the Zoo Lake in Johannesburg. The ballet is *Swan Lake*.
- 27th October Mme de Arias entertains Princess Margaret to dinner after they have attended a performance given by the Bolshoi Ballet Company at the Royal Opera House.
- November The proposed visit by the Sadler's Wells Ballet Company to Moscow is cancelled.
- 1957
- 16th January The Sadler's Wells Ballet Company becomes (by Royal Charter) the Royal Ballet.
- March–April Thirteen appearances at Covent Garden.
- 26th March She dances the Doll Ballerina in the new production of *Petrushka*.
- 13th–18th May She dances during the Royal Ballet's season at the Dublin Festival.
- 20th–25th May Accompanied by Michael Somes, Rowena Jackson and Bryan Ashbridge, she opens a two weeks' season at the Empire Theatre, Sydney; she takes nine curtain calls. She dances in every performance during the fortnight.
- 1st September The Royal Ballet, with Margot Fonteyn, goes on its fifth transatlantic tour, which is to last for five months.



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